Editor's Introduction

The book of Revelation fascinated Jonathan Edwards, America's premier philosopher-theologian, a fact that has been a source of bewilderment and embarrassment to some students of American thought. For him the Apocalypse came alive with each new reading. Like others in the eighteenth century, Edwards believed that the biblical visions with the mysterious figures and cryptic references could be very useful to the Christian church. He drew heavily in his sermons and treatises upon the Revelation's bizarre and sometimes baffling symbolism, finding it a source of comfort and encouragement for the people of New England. Edwards spent long hours studying the Revelation, the only book of the Bible he favored with a separate commentary; that preoccupation began in early manhood as he searched for the best interpretation of the Apocalypse, and it spanned the full range of his years. Not content with mere curiosities or speculations, he probed for the pastoral and theological implications of the prophecies.

Few people in the twentieth century share his enthusiasm for the Apocalypse; even fewer will find Edwards' interpretation persuasive or intellectually respectable. Many of us today have little patience with such pursuits. Those committed to contemporary apocalypticism will probably judge his reflections inappropriate for devotional literature. This volume does not promise to raise Edwards' intellectual or religious stock, but it will allow a fuller assessment of the apocalyptic factor in his life and thought by publishing for the first time his private "Notes on the Apocalypse," together with his treatise published in 1748, An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer.1

1. The Apocalyptic Tradition

Edwards joined a long and curious tradition when he began his notebook on the Apocalypse, a tradition stretching back to early Christianity and embracing a diversity of issues and ideas. Some church fathers, such as Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200), espoused the hope of an earthly millennium based on selected Old Testament prophecies and the book of Revelation. They expected the whole creation to be restored to its pristine condition upon Christ's return and with redeemed humanity be brought to its intended perfection. Others in the early church, most notably Origen (c. 185–c. 254), denounced such chiliasm as a carnal Jewish dream and would have denied canonical status to the Revelation. With the Constantinian settlement in the fourth century, persecution became nearly a thing of the past, and the original context of Christian apocalyptic literature ceased to exist. Problems of theological adjustment and institutional construction now faced the emerging church. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the primary architect of the orthodox theological consensus in the West, adopted a new approach to the Apocalypse by translating the eschatological hope from the future to the present and thoroughly spiritualizing it. For him the millennium of Revelation 20
symbolized the present militant age of the church on earth. The first resurrection was a spiritual experience of individuals, and the second was to come at the end of time. Augustine's reinterpretation accentuated the consolatory nature of the Revelation, which he viewed as an account of the victorious struggle of the city of God against the forces of Satan. The western church followed the lead of Augustine; from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries his interpretation prevailed almost unchallenged, with a few notable exceptions.

In the twelfth century Joachim of Flora (c. 1132–1202), a Cistercian monk, devised a different exposition of the Apocalypse as part of a vigorous movement for monastic reform. He explained the course of world history by three successive ages, one for each member of the Trinity. The third age, that of the Spirit, was to be a time of liberty and new spirituality. Joachim's scheme shifted the focus of the Revelation to the future and raised the hopes of his followers. The Spiritual Franciscans declared themselves men of the new era and used the Apocalypse to denounce their adversaries—both the empire and the papacy—as antichristian. This future-oriented, polemical interpretation was not lost upon other dissident groups. In England the disciples of John Wycliffe (c. 1329–84) sanctioned their cause with the seal of prophecy. John Purvey (c. 1353–1428), a close friend of Wycliffe, wrote a commentary predicting the progressive decline of the papal Antichrist. On the Continent the Taborites, the radical followers of John Huss (c. 1369–1415), preached a chiliastic doctrine, attacking the royalist party in Prague as antichristian and proclaiming their own cities to be centers of the coming kingdom. They took up the sword of revenge to enforce their apocalyptic logic. At the time of the Reformation, Thomas Muentzer (c. 1490–1525), Melchior Hoffmann (c. 1500–43), John of Leyden (1510–36), and other radical Protestants availed themselves of the book of Revelation as a reinforcement for their own programs of reform and revolution, often with devastating results for themselves and their followers. During this period, fervor and fanaticism became synonymous with radical apocalypticism in the minds of many.

It was primarily that association which drove Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–64) away from millenarianism. In his early years as a reformer, Luther voiced uncertainty about the Revelation, declaring it neither apostolic nor prophetic. Later he moderated his judgment and argued from the book that the Pope was the Antichrist and the Protestant cause righteous. He searched for historical equivalents—past, present, and future—to fit the details of the visions, though he continued to fear the excesses accompanying extreme apocalypticism. Calvin was the most guarded of all the reformers in his attitude toward the Apocalypse. He stood firmly in the Augustinian line, rejecting chiliasm, eschatological calculations, and millenarian fanaticism. The Revelation was the only book of the Bible on which he did not write a commentary.

The polemical bent of Protestant exegetes produced an inevitable response from the Roman Catholic community. Near the turn of the seventeenth century two prominent Jesuits wrote commentaries offering different interpretations of the Revelation. Francisco Ribera (1537–91) contended that the prophecies of the Antichrist were still unfulfilled.
The Antichrist was to be a Jewish deceiver of the world who would reign for three and a half years. By contrast, Luis de Alcasar (1554–1613) thought that the prophecies of the Apocalypse had already been fulfilled in the struggles of the early church with Judaism and paganism. The last two chapters of the Revelation, he said, tell of the triumph of the Roman Catholic Church.

The portion of the apocalyptic tradition that developed in post-Reformation England formed the immediate background of Edwards' "Notes on the Apocalypse." In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries England spawned a host of Protestant commentators who planted a love of the Apocalypse deep in the soul of English Protestantism. John Bale (1495–1563) was one such exegete, a Carmelite monk turned defender of Reformed doctrine. He explained the conflict between Protestant and Catholic powers in terms of a struggle between the church of Christ and the forces of Antichrist, the latter in his eyes the Roman papacy. He in turn influenced another convert to the Reformation, perhaps the most prominent of all English commentators on the Apocalypse, John Foxe (1516–87), whom he met on the Continent during the Marian exile. Foxe's "Book of Martyrs," a chronicle of Protestant suffering in England, combined apocalyptic lore with ecclesiastical history, fervent nationalism, and unbounded hatred of Roman Catholicism. The result was a volume of epic significance for England and a place in the national pantheon for Foxe. Edwards cited the Acts and Monuments early in his notebook.

Foxe and Bale retained the Augustinian mode of interpretation, but later generations of English exegetes began to move away from that cautious view of the Revelation. For example, Thomas Brightman (1562–1607), a clergyman with Puritan leanings, spoke of two millenniums instead of one: the first, ending in 1300, was Augustinian in conception; the second, extending for the next thousand years, was inaugurated by the use of the means of grace and promised a future glorious time for the church on earth. Brightman attacked Ribera's idea that the prophecies remained unfulfilled by arguing that three vials already had been poured, beginning with Elizabeth's strictures against the

Roman Catholics, and that the remaining four were impending. He was optimistic about the future despite present hardships. John Cotton (1584–1652), a Puritan revered on both sides of the Atlantic, also formulated new ideas about the Revelation. In his sermon-commentaries he affirmed that Rome, the subject of the visions, had passed through three distinct phases: pagan, before Christ; Christian, during the time of the emperors; and anti-Christian, under the popes. The seven trumpets of the Apocalypse were directed against Christian Rome and the seven vials against anti-Christian Rome. Five of the latter had been poured, Cotton maintained, and the beginning of the millennium was imminent—in 1655, to be exact. History was moving rapidly toward a climax in his view.

Seventeenth-century England was ripe for such talk and for even more radical speculation. Unlike the situation on the Continent, there existed no confessional deterrents to chiliasm in England. In this context Joseph Mede (1586–1638), a Cambridge don and biblical scholar, took a new look at millennialism. His Clavis Apocalyptica offered a different interpretation of the
book of Revelation grounded upon its linguistic structure. He believed that a proper understanding of the text would result from a correct ordering of the visions because the prophecies were not written in the order of their fulfillment. Discovering the synchronisms—that is, the sections agreeing in time and period—unlocks the secrets of the book. The seventh seal, according to Mede, contains the events of the seven trumpets, most of which have been fulfilled in the distant past. When the sixth trumpet sounds, the six vials are poured on the antichristian forces. Four vials, he contended, remain to be emptied on Rome, the enemy of the church. The battle of Armageddon under the seventh vial will usher in the reign of the saints on earth for a thousand years. The first resurrection is a bodily resurrection of the martyrs, who will rule with the saints during the millennium.

--- 006 ---

Mede's millennialism had an impact upon an important community of English scholars, trained in biblical learning and the new sciences, who had become fascinated with the prospect of coordinating scriptural prophecy with the new theories about the universe. Henry More (1614–87), a student of Mede's, developed the optimism implicit in Mede's ideas in a commentary of his own. Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) became the epitome of the old and the new learning in tandem by his attempts to decipher the apocalyptic discourses of the Bible and to fix the chronology of the apocalyptic kingdoms with the aid of the developing sciences. His successor at Cambridge, William Whiston (1667–1752), a mathematician and theologian, devoted himself equally to scriptural chronology and scientific investigation. Edwards knew firsthand the works of all three men.2

During the decade of the Civil War in England, a time of heightened interest in the Apocalypse, Mede's writings influenced another group, the social and political activists of all persuasions. Some like William Twisse (1578–1646) and Thomas Goodwin (1600–80), members of the Westminster Assembly, adopted Mede's millennialism and stressed the theological implications of the idea. Others, such as John Archer, a lecturer at All Hallows church in London, carried the millennial speculation further by distinguishing three states of Christ's kingdom: the providential, the spiritual, and the monarchical. The millennium, he concluded, will be a monarchical kingdom inaugurated by the physical return of Christ, shortly after which he will leave the earth and return again at the end of the thousand years. Archer stressed the necessity of divine initiative in the coming of the kingdom.3 The Fifth Monarchists, by contrast, planned to set up Christ's kingdom by force, a kingdom associated with the mythical society of Daniel 2:44. Therefore they revolted against Charles I and eventually opposed Oliver Cromwell as well, regarding themselves as chosen by God to rule over their oppressors and to restructure society in accord with his will. The movement failed to institutionalize itself, and after 1660 the Fifth Monarchists faded into the ranks of Nonconformity or were suppressed by the authorities.4

--- 007 ---

The tumult of the Civil War era discredited the most radical interpretations of the Apocalypse in England and opened the way for other methods of explaining the visions. Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), the Dutch jurist and theologian, introduced one new approach. Irenic in nature and Arminian in theology, Grotius ignored the antipapal, the polemical, and the revolutionary
interpretations of the Apocalypse and turned his attention to philological investigation of the text, thereby raising a whole range of new questions. The works of Henry Hammond (1605–60), a biblical annotator of Arminian persuasion, were the chief vehicle for his ideas in England. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the liberal theologian Daniel Whitby (1638–1726) proposed another perspective upon the millennium, arguing that it was not an actual reign of the resurrected saints, but a figurative thousand years when the church will prosper in advance of Christ's return to the earth. Whitby's postmillennialism, so named because the second coming of Christ is positioned after the millennium, was implicit in the work of commentators during the preceding century, and his formulation of the idea won some adherents. Among his disciples on the English scene were Charles Daubuz (1673–1717), a Huguenot exile, and Moses Lowman (1680–1752), a dissenting scholar-divine. Edwards struggled mightily in his notebook with the interpretation of Lowman.

The Christian apocalyptic tradition from Irenaeus to Moses Lowman was rich and varied, but also strange and sometimes perverse. Edwards was acquainted with this heritage of Christian thought; through the years he shaped parts of it into a unique theological configuration consistent with his other ideas and his time and place in the eighteenth century.

2. The Beginning of the Notebook

"In America," wrote Perry Miller, "the greatest artist of the apocalypse was, of course, Jonathan Edwards"; but he was hardly the only American to form such biblical components into functional designs. Edwards came to his craft naturally, for in New England a long line of colonial spokesmen—most prominently, John Cotton and Roger Williams in the first generation, the historian Edward Johnson, the poet Michael Wigglesworth, Samuel Sewall the commentator, and father and son Increase and Cotton Mather—had made the visions of the Revelation a formative influence upon the consciousness of the people. The Puritans filled their diaries, sermons, and public papers with apocalyptic discourse. After leaving their homes in the old world under duress, they identified their cause in the wilderness with the plight of the persecuted saints in the Revelation and transferred to their commonwealths a sense of divine mission and a spirit of apocalyptic fervor. Later when that sense of election eroded and new waves of settlers buried the religious commitment under a host of competing claims, the clergy rose to castigate the people for their sins and to warn them of impending punishment, drawing upon the imagery and ideas of the Apocalypse. Then the Puritans wrote the history of their experiences as though they were the subjects of the Revelation. In effect, they translated the apocalyptic tradition into a meaningful literature of their own.

The eighteenth century did little to undermine the place of apocalyptic among the people of New England. The children of the Puritans viewed the imperial conflicts of the new century, a dominant social and political reality, as part of the ongoing struggle of the church against the forces of the Antichrist. Edwards was certainly weaned on such anti-Catholicism. During his childhood in Windsor, Queen Anne's War
(1702–13) reached into his home when the Connecticut assembly appointed his father Timothy as a chaplain on the expedition against Canada. The colonists imagined antichristian forces conspiring against them at a distance and in the neighboring forests. Captives returning from Canada extolled providence for their release and in the same breath warned their fellow settlers of the dangers from the unholy alliance between the French Jesuits and their Indian subordinates. In 1723 Solomon Stoddard, Edwards' grandfather, called for more active Indian missions in the hope that the natives would "fall in with the Papists," thereby prolonging bloodshed. For New England the struggle with Rome had not ended in 1649 with the execution of Charles I, nor in 1689 with the accession of William and Mary to the throne; it was continuing as the enemy employed new and more dangerous weapons against the Puritans. As a result in 1723 the young Edwards wrote, "The saints shall revenge themselves, no otherwise than by doing their utmost for the destruction of popery" (AP; below, p. 120)—a sentiment favored by the majority of the citizenry.

When Edwards penned that line in his notebook, the furor over events in New Haven during the preceding fall had not yet subsided. Yale College in New Haven had been founded to preserve the Reformed Protestant faith inviolate from new theologies. During his undergraduate days—times of turmoil for the young institution—and during two subsequent years of theological training, Edwards had been exposed to a thoroughly Protestant curriculum. Therefore the "apostasy" of the rector Timothy Cutler, two of his associates, and some of the neighboring ministers to the Anglican Church shocked the religious establishment, which was prepared to defend itself against assaults of Rome from without but not against subversion from within. The pulps and newspapers of New England screamed alarm and poured forth exhortations. The apostasy provided new incentive to examine the prophecies concerning the antichristian conspiracy, which in the Puritans' eyes included the Church of England. As the reverberations still sounded among the public, Edwards was writing in his private notebook: "What is said to Pergamos seems very well to suit the case of the Church of England; 'and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is' [Revelation 2:13]" (AP; below, p. 99).

Turning to the book of Revelation was natural for Edwards because by the end of 1722 he had developed a disciplined program of private study, including the regular investigation of the Bible. As a young man he resolved "To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same." There is no evidence that he ever gave up that resolution, although he frequently chided himself for neglecting study and losing "that relish of the Scriptures" necessary for faith and scholarship. Edwards cultivated the habit of biblical study, especially during the year he served in New York as a supply minister. "I had then," he later recollected, "and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book whatsoever." At the same time he became preoccupied with observing the progress of God's kingdom and praying for its advancement; he watched contemporary events for signs of divine activity:
If I heard the least hint of any thing that happened in any part of the world, that appear'd to me, in some respect or other, to have a favorable aspect on the interest of Christ's kingdom, my soul eagerly catch'd at it; and it would much animate and refresh me. I used to be earnest to read public news-letters, mainly for that end; to see if I could not find some news favorable to the interest of religion in the world.\footnote{1}

It will become evident that Edwards retained that habit in later years.

In New York Edwards wrote his earliest comments on the Revelation, a group of miscellaneous reflections loosely tied together by the theme of conflict.\footnote{2} According to him, the greatest barrier to the advancement of God's kingdom was the Church of Rome, which he assailed as the most dangerous foe of Christ, worse than the Jews or the Mahometans, an unscrupulous enemy of the church comparable to "a viper or some loathsome, poisonous, crawling monster."\footnote{3} Despite this opposition, God will accomplish his purpose in the world because the operation of providence cannot be thwarted. Even at the moment of greatest antichristian oppression, God was not without witnesses; he has always maintained a remnant of an evangelical church. Since the Reformation, God has reversed the fortunes of the church by pouring out the vials of wrath upon his enemies. The memory of persecution and martyrdom will fade in the future as the knowledge of divinity spreads, injustices are rectified, the saints and martyrs vindicated, and men stimulated to greater holiness during the millennium. The promised triumph of the saints is the hope and encouragement of the church on earth.

In the spring of 1723 Edwards increased his commitment to the study of the Apocalypse. After an apparent evaluation of his entire study program, he began a separate notebook for comments on the book of Revelation, the "Notes on the Apocalypse." Earlier he had noted an "Apocalypse" among his contemplated projects and had drawn up a list of "Books to be Inquired for," a partial forecast of the range of interests to be explored in the new notebook:

The best geography.

The best history of the world.

The best exposition of the Apocalypse.

The best general ecclesiastical history from Christ to the present time.

The best upon the types of the Scripture.

Which are the most useful and necessary of the Fathers.

The best chronology.
The best historical dictionary of the nature of Boyle's dictionary.

The best that treats of the cabalistical learning of the Jews.4

His fascination with apocalyptic carried Edwards from geography to cabalism before the completion of his quest for the best available

-- 012 --

volumes. The opening portion of the "Apocalypse" was one product of this flurry of enthusiasm and activity.5

The first pages of the notebook provide the most comprehensive analysis of the book of Revelation ever offered by Edwards, a synoptic account in which he commented chapter by chapter upon a range of textual and substantive issues. The usefulness of the visions, he conceded, depends upon their clarity; therefore he probed the complexities of the book in order to untangle its structure and themes. He established to his own satisfaction that "the method of these visions is first, to give a more general representation of things, and then afterwards, a more distinct description of the particular changes and revolutions that are the subjects of them" (AP; below, p. 106), a view reminiscent of Joseph Mede's contention that the book does not proceed in uninterrupted chronological fashion. But other uncertainties nagged Edwards as he searched for a satisfactory interpretation of the figures inhabiting the pages of the Revelation. It did not require special insight to discover that the church will be troubled during much of her earthly sojourn, according to the visions. On that interpreters in every age agreed. However, the nature and duration of the suffering of the faithful, the identity of the persecutors, the time of the end of the persecution, and the prospects for the future—these issues left commentators divided.

Early in the "Apocalypse" Edwards took one unequivocal position from which he never deviated, namely, that the key to the entire book of Revelation, the single issue "it is impossible to be mistaken in the general meaning of," was the description and identity of the Antichrist. Revelation 17:18 "is spoken the plainest of any one passage in the whole book.... 'Tis the only part of this prophecy that is spoken without allegory" (AP; below, pp. 107, 120). Edwards was convinced that the Roman papacy was the Antichrist and that the Revelation describes the rise, reign, and fall of the antichristian forces together with the interrelated fortunes of the church. The identification of the Antichrist was not incidental to the central design of the Bible, for as Christ was "the chief subject of the prophecies of the Old Testament," so the Antichrist is of the New. The activities of the Antichrist were purposely shrouded in secrecy until the time of his appearance; this explanation accounts for the obscurity and mystery of the Revelation, according to Edwards. Edwards defined "mystery" as what is concealed or not yet known (AP; below, pp. 118–19); plenty of mystery remained for him in the Revelation.

-- 013 --

It was no mystery that the Antichrist and his minions were powerful. The persecutions suffered by the faithful throughout the centuries of church history, in Edwards' mind, established the strength of the coalition. The leaders of the antichristian forces manifest their might through
trickery and deception; the clergy dupe their followers by pretended miracles and pretentious displays of pomp. Such deceits as the doctrine of transsubstantiation, the claim to infallibility, and dispensations are miracles, Edwards exclaimed, "that God himself cannot do!" Ceremonies, "priest's shews," and similar exhibitions amaze the "gazing multitude" and make them credulous and submissive. Most offensive of all is the attempt of the Antichrist to exalt "himself above all that is called God, or that is worshiped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God" (AP; below, pp. 112, 125). This is the supreme blasphemy.

The antidote to such chicanery and imposture, Edwards insisted, is the manifestation of truth that will dash to pieces the false doctrines and practices of the antichristian kingdom. The light of the gospel will destroy the darkness and deceit. The Word of God cuts through the cloud surrounding the Antichrist, and he stands revealed before his followers, who then desert him. The downfall of the beast signals the beginning of more glorious times for the church on earth. No longer will the faithful be the subjects of persecution and hardship; those who oppressed the church will themselves feel the sting of God's wrath. According to Edwards, when the Antichrist is overthrown, the final joys of the church will be foreshadowed during the reign of the saints on the earth. Ultimately the church militant becomes the church triumphant in the "new heaven and new earth." The "event of things" will show this to be the will of God for his people (AP; below, p. 120).

The visions of the Seer were for Edwards an apocalyptic timetable for the future. Like others in the tradition, he tried his hand at correlating the prophecies with the progression of historical events. He equated the opening of the seals with the then future persecutions of the early church by the heathen Roman Empire, the sounding of the trumpets with the disasters befalling the Christian empire at the hands of the barbarian and Islamic forces, and the pouring of the vials with the assaults upon the antichristian kingdom by her opponents beginning in the days before the Reformation. Edwards calculated that the papacy would fall by 1866 at the end of the traditional forty-two months of the reign of Antichrist. His interpretation was based on the belief that God works through the historical process to achieve his will, not in spite of or apart from that process.

Edwards' Early View of the Apocalypse

Edwards' earliest reflections on the Revelation were a natural product of his situation. He soon began to use his new notebook to forge theological concepts from the exegetical materials on the visions.

3. The "Apocalypse," the Ministry, and the Millennium
In the years after 1723 it became necessary for Edwards to adapt his study habits to a broadening set of responsibilities. Nonetheless, he persisted with his interest in the Apocalypse and never set aside his notebook for more than limited periods of time. "My heart," he wrote looking back in 1739, "has been much on the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world.… And my mind has been much entertained and delighted, with the Scripture promises and prophecies, of the future glorious advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth." The "Apocalypse" was the private record of his entertainment and delight; his sermons and published writings documented his increasing public involvement in the fortunes of the church and a disposition to apply eschatological notions to contemporary situations. Together private reflections and public representations formed an intriguing and complex, but sometimes contradictory, network of theological ideas.

In the public sphere the most pressing new demand made upon Edwards was as a preacher; as a result he frequently turned to his private notebooks for ideas and themes in his sermons. In 1729 when the mantle of Solomon Stoddard fell squarely upon his shoulders, the young minister faced the task of preaching two or more times each week. He found that the book of Revelation, as well as other parts of the Bible, could be accommodated to virtually any pastoral need by the deft art of sermonizing. Today sixty-six sermons on the Revelation remain among his papers, evidence of a strong homiletical interest in that part of the Bible.

His earliest extant sermon on the Apocalypse shows the youthful preacher weaving his private reflections into a discourse designed to motivate his congregation to greater concern for the things of religion. Edwards explained the text, "And the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass" (Revelation 21:18), as a "metaphorical description" of the city of God, the biblical Zion or New Jerusalem. This "new heaven and new earth," the culmination of God's redemptive work, is the reward of the saints. It is fitting, Edwards observed, that a description of the city of God be placed at the conclusion of "the most comprehensive and most particular prophecy of all the changes that should happen to the Christian church that we have in the whole Bible," for it specifies what is the "ultimate end and drift of all these things" (Bk. I, p. 2). But the text is a visionary representation, not a literal description: "there is nothing upon earth that will suffice to represent to us the glories of heaven" (Bk. I, p. 4). All similitudes that shadow forth the heavenly state are inadequate, at best providing only a glimpse of the excellence of that state.

Reason tells man that God's motive for the creation was the communication of his own happiness to "something else." In the "Apocalypse" Edwards found the vision of the four beasts (Revelation 4:6–9) confirmatory; the second beast resembling a calf symbolizes the goodness of God. "Goodness," he wrote, "is the only end why he has created the world, and the ultimate end of every dispensation of whatever nature" (below, p. 137). There will come a time when "God will fully manifest his love to good men, to those that answer the end of their creation," in a manner that Christians have not yet enjoyed here on earth (Bk. I, p. 20). This, he concluded, is evidence of a future state of happiness after death.

If there be such a glorious future, Edwards asked in the sermon, why is the world so dull and neglectful of such things? It is foolish and shameful that Christians think so little about the New
Jerusalem, that they fix their hearts on things in the world that are mere "loss and dung" compared to the rewards received with the crown of glory (Bk. II, p. 20). "How unreasonable are they who grudge to deny themselves for the sake of heaven. Truly no rhetoric can represent their folly" (Bk. II, p. 21). By linking the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem with the happiness of all who heard him, Edwards prepared the logical ground for urging his congregation to strive for consistency between their daily activities and the larger purpose of God in the world.

Edwards used the book of Revelation for other homiletical purposes: consolation, imprecation, and preparation for battle as well as for the sacrament. He found it thoroughly suitable to the application of legal terrors. For example, in 1731 or 1732 he preached a sermon with the following stated doctrine: "'Tis not inconsistent with the attributes of God to punish ungodly men with a misery that is eternal."[1] According to Edwards, the text in Revelation 19:2–3 is a visionary account of the songs of praise upon the occasion of God's "executing vengeance on Antichrist" at the fall of Babylon when the "great whore" is paid in kind for shedding the blood of the saints. The saints sing with delight as they watch the smoke ascend from Babylon after the overthrow of the antichristian church and the punishment of its members. That smoke rises forever.

In this sermon Edwards went from the images of the Apocalypse into the imagination of his congregation. The smoke rising forever is a representation of the eternal torment and misery of those being punished for their sins. Eternal chastisement, he warned, is not inconsistent with the mercy of God, for the nature of the crime dictates the severity of the punishment. Since God is "a Being whose loveliness, honorableness and authority are infinite" (p. 12), the violation of obligations to him demands a commensurate punishment. There will be no respite in hell. The vindication of divine majesty requires that ungodly men be so treated. "When the sun is grown so old that he grows pale and has lost his light, their torments will be as extreme as ever" (p. 5). Eternal punishment will be "always but beginning." Those who think this too cruel a conception of God, Edwards said, have not looked closely at the horrid nature of sin. All agree that the unending punishment meted out to papal persecutors does not seem too harsh or extreme, he reminded his Protestant hearers, because of the terribleness of their manifest crime. So it will appear with the eternal torments for other sins when the saints have an adequate sense of the excellence of God and of the dreadfulness of transgressions against him. Edwards pressed into service a Protestant reading of the Revelation in order to instruct his congregation about the nature and potential consequences of sin.

The Apocalypse proved a rich storehouse of diverse sermonic materials suitable to the range of practical situations confronting Edwards, but pastoral obligations did not dull his fascination with the more speculative apocalyptic issues. During the same years he continued to fill the pages of the notebook with a variety of reflections, including additional conjectures about the meaning of the four beasts of Revelation 4, which he regarded as symbols of God's providential care, and further accounts of the devices of the Antichrist, especially as portrayed in the tale of the two beasts in Revelation 13. In this period the millennium
remained a matter of consuming private interest for him. In the notebook he compiled more examples of the biblical use of the number "seven" as evidence that the glorious time of the church's prosperity would begin in the "seventh thousand year" of the world, or about 2000 in the present era, a calculation consistent in his judgment with the pattern of sabbaths established by God during the week of creation.  

Edwards toyed with the political implications of the "theocracy" that will be established in the millennium, when both civil and ecclesiastical governments will be overthrown: then "the absolute and despotic power of the kings of the earth shall be taken away, and liberty shall reign throughout the earth." That liberty will not result in anarchy, but neither will it be limited to spiritual freedom, for it includes release "from the tyrannical and absolute power of men." During the millennium kings will be like the judges who ruled ancient Israel before the monarchy was established—a form of government that pleased God greatly, according to Edwards' understanding of the Bible. They will be "as the kings of England now are in civil matters"—a compliment the heirs of Edwards would later revoke in a long list of grievances against George III. In that glorious day, Edwards conjectured, a variety of forms of government may prevail, but none shall be contrary to "true liberty" (AP; below, p. 137).

The geography of the millennium, another issue that divided commentators, attracted his exegetical attention. Edwards found scriptural warrant for placing the land of Canaan at the center of the coming kingdom of Christ. In the "Apocalypse" he noted the geographical advantages of Canaan, located literally at the center of the old world in the midst of three continents and so positioned with respect to waterways that all of the remaining parts of the globe could be reached easily. Canaan, wrote Edwards, was "to be the place from whence the truth should shine forth, and true religion spread around into all parts of the world." Although Israel's strategic location had not been fully exploited, he was confident "that the most glorious part of the church will hereafter be there, at the center of the kingdom of Christ, communicating influences to all other parts" (below, p. 134).

In like manner, he speculated that the return of the Jews to their homeland is inevitable because the promises of land made to them have been only partially fulfilled. God intends the Jews to be "a visible monument" of his grace and power. The return to their traditional homeland, however, was premised by Edwards upon a conversion of the Jews to Christianity. Then "religion and learning will be there at the highest; more excellent books will be there written, etc." Canaan will be the spiritual center of the coming kingdom, and Israel will again be a truly distinct nation. Yet other Christians will have access to Jerusalem because the Jews will "look upon all the world to be their brethren, as much as the Christians in Boston and the Christians in other parts of New England look on each other as brethren." The millennium, Edwards reasoned, will be a time of such fraternity and unity (AP; below, p. 135).

In the years after the beginning of the notebook, a pattern emerged in Edwards' treatment of the Apocalypse. Speculation in private but discretion in public came to be characteristic of him. He
kept conjectures to himself in the notebook and in his sermons utilized more conventional and less controversial eschatological ideas—heaven, hell, the blessedness of one and the terror of the other. The millennium, a major subject of Edwards' private reflections, was noticeably absent as a leading topic in his early sermons, even on occasions when it would have served his announced ends. Sometimes he avoided explicit reference to it, preferring indirect expressions subject to more than one interpretation, perhaps in order to escape the taint of fanaticism and radicalism associated with the idea.

In no period was Edwards' public discretion on apocalyptic issues more evident than at the time of the surprising conversions in Northampton during the winter of 1734–35. The revival demanded public interpretation by the young preacher. "Pressing into the Kingdom of God," a sermon he preached in February 1735 during the stirring, displayed his characteristic way of dealing with eschatological topics. In the discourse he underscored the "extreme necessity" of his congregation and urged them to get on with the business of heaven because it was the proper objective of the Christian life. There is no safety or refuge outside heaven; men will cry in vain to God as they are swallowed by a "fiery deluge of wrath." "Sacrifice every thing," he exhorted his hearers, for the eternal interest of your souls. "You that have a mind to obtain converting grace and to go to heaven when you die, now is your season! Now, if you have any sort of prudence for your own

salvation, and have not a mind to go to hell, improve this season!" Edwards argued passionately because he was convinced that God might be gathering his elect a last time "before some great and sore judgment," an argument he based on an interpretation of Revelation 7–8. In the past, he noted, God has frequently brought "great and destroying judgments" after a special effusion of his Spirit. "And this may be the case now," he added, "that God is about, in a great measure, to forsake this land, and give up this people, and to bring most awful and overwhelming judgments upon it, and that he is now gathering in his elect, to secure them from the calamity. The state of the nation, and of this land, never looked so threatening of such a thing as at this day." Edwards tried to promote a concern for the business of religion by raising the specter of impending judgment and woe. He did not use a millennial hypothesis to interpret the affairs of 1734–35 in Northampton.

Edwards displayed the same reluctance in his later accounts of the revival. Despite the fact that the religious awakening in the community paralleled his private anticipations of the preparatory period leading to the future glorious state of the church on earth, he avoided the suggestion that the revival was a beginning or even a type of the millennium. His earliest description of the affair in a letter to Benjamin Colman (1673–1747) on May 30, 1735, spoke of the work as "an extraordinary dispensation of providence" on account of its "universality" among the people, its "extent" throughout many towns, and its "swift progress from place to place." But Edwards added, "I forbear to make reflections, or to guess what God is about to do; I leave this to you, and shall only say, as I desire always to say from my heart, 'To God be all the glory, whose work alone it is.'" In a longer account written for publication in 1736 when the religious fervor had passed, he placed the events in an eschatological framework, noting that as religion became universal, "noise among the dry bones waxed louder and louder. All other talk but about spiritual
and eternal things was thrown by… The only thing was to get the kingdom of heaven, and everyone appeared pressing into it." Edwards ascribed no millennial significance or preparatory role to this awakening. Two years later when the full

--- 021 ---

text of the narrative was published in America, it contained more detailed descriptions of the "abiding change" worked on many persons in Northampton: they have "a new sense of things, new apprehensions and views of God, of the divine attributes, and Jesus Christ, and the great things of the Gospel" as well as "new sweetmesses and delights." It is evident, Edwards wrote, that God was manifesting his glory "in this corner of the world." The signs were similar to his expectations for the times preceding the millennial reign, but he did not state that association. When he spoke of the restraints upon Satan during the revival of 1734–35, he did not link them with the traditional binding of Satan (Revelation 20:1–3) during the millennium. He passed by these and other opportunities to make public his private thoughts.

The ministers who wrote the prefaces to the various accounts were less restrained in their judgments. In a letter dated October 12, 1737, the Englishmen Isaac Watts (1674–1748) and John Guyse (1680–1761) were quick to associate the "astonishing exercises" of God's power with "his promises concerning the latter days"—an association, they wrote, that "gives us further encouragement to pray, and wait, and hope for the like display of his power in the midst of us." They regarded the events in America as indicative of "how easy it will be for our blessed Lord to make a full accomplishment of all his predictions concerning his kingdom." They closed their preface with a request that all readers pray for the full accomplishment of God's promises "concerning the large extent of this salvation in the latter days of the world." The four ministers who introduced the American edition of the narrative sounded the same theme, linking the "wonders" of the events in Northampton with the apocalyptic predictions of Scripture. "And as this wonderful work may be considered as an earnest of what God will do towards the close of the Gospel day," they wrote, "it affords great encouragement to our faith and prayer in pleading those promises which relate to the glorious extent and flourishing of the kingdom of Christ upon earth, and have not yet had their full and final accomplishment." Compared to these, Edwards' judgments about the revival of 1734–35 were indeed restrained.

Edwards' restraint did not imply the absence of hope on his part. On

--- 022 ---

the contrary, his expectations had been buoyed by the outpouring of the Spirit in Northampton; he eagerly awaited times of greater success for the church. Therefore no one was more disappointed when religious depression set in again and dullness reigned in the hearts of his congregation. The return to a period of spiritual torpor, however, did not end his life of study; in fact, in the years after 1738 his reading raised his sights anew and led him to hope with greater intensity that God might do something special among the people of New England, an expectation he came to partly as a result of studying the commentary on the Revelation by Moses Lowman. With Lowman's *Paraphrase and Notes* in hand, Edwards reevaluated his earlier views of the Apocalypse and began a period of concentrated activity in the notebook.
One public measure of the impact of Lowman upon Edwards was the series of sermons he preached between March and August of 1739, published posthumously as *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1774). Edwards hoped to spark another revival in his congregation with the sermons. As he addressed those who were "neglecting the business of religion and their own souls," he had little good to say about the present very dark times. He prayed for another awakening because he believed that God advances his work of redemption through successive effusions of his Spirit. From the fall of man to the birth of Christ, from the incarnation to the resurrection, and from Christ's resurrection until the end of the world, "it has been God's manner in every remarkable new establishment of the state of his visible church, to give a remarkable outpouring of his Spirit." Therefore, wrote Edwards, "it would be ungrateful in us not to take notice of … that remarkable pouring out of the Spirit of God which has been of late in this part of New England, of which we, in this town, have had such a share." God has worked in Northampton and other remote parts of the world—as remote as Muscovy, Malabar, and Saxony—promoting the work of redemption. The kingdom of heaven, a synonym for the evangelical state of things in the church and world, is always advancing toward fullness through successive dispensations of providence, each of which may be described as Christ's coming. Christ came in his kingdom at the time of the apostles and in the fourth century when Christianity gained imperial recognition; he will come again when the Antichrist falls and finally when he himself returns to judge the world and take the saints to eternal glory.

At the present the church is in the third period, the "latter days of the world," according to Edwards, a term he used for all Christian experience after the resurrection. It is a time of trial for the church with only short intermissions or respite. God has always chosen to have "the darkest time with the Christian church just before the break of day"; deliverance follows the dark night of affliction, the time of "greatest extremity." The fortunes of the church during this period of tribulation comprise the subject matter of the major part of the book of Revelation, the one prophetic book in the New Testament. The church now has only the guidance of prophecy: "Where Scripture history fails, there prophecy takes place; so that the account is still carried on, and the chain is not broken till we come to the very last link of it in the consummation of all things."

From the book of Revelation, according to Edwards, the church learns that the Roman papacy fulfills the prophecies of the Antichrist, and that the fall of Antichrist will be a moment of signal importance in history. Earlier he had calculated to his own satisfaction the time of that fall (AP; below, p. 129), but in 1739 he was reluctant to go on record with a public prediction. "I am far," he said in the sermons, "from pretending to determine the time when the reign of Antichrist began, which is a point that has been so much controverted among divines and expositors." Edwards' reluctance to offer specific dates in public was probably reinforced by his reading of Lowman, who had explained the meaning of the first five vials, he thought, "with greater probability perhaps than any who went before him." On the basis of Lowman, he changed his mind and pushed forward his own private apocalyptic timetable. The present age was not under the third vial but the sixth, according to the new interpretation, and fewer events remained to be fulfilled before the inauguration of the millennium than under Edwards' old scheme. Pastorally
the change gave Edwards greater cause to direct an urgent summons to his congregation, who seemed to him very far from the state described in the Scriptures. Nevertheless, the recognition of God's customary way of accomplishing his salvation "should strengthen our faith in those promises," he wrote, "and encourage us, and stir us up to earnest prayer to God for the accomplishment of the great and glorious things which yet remain to be fulfilled." There was some reason for cautious optimism in the midst of religious stagnation. God works gradually in his kingdom through the means of grace, including preaching, prayer, and the other ordinances. When the kingdom of Antichrist is overthrown, the reign of Christ will follow, and the church will enjoy a state of peace and prosperity.

For Edwards the millennium was not the ultimate goal of the entire work of redemption, but only an earnest of the heavenly state which is the fullness of the kingdom. Accordingly, in the sermons on Isaiah 51:8 the millennium took second place to heaven, the objective of all God's dealings with the church. Following the years of prosperity on earth, a new rebellion will shake the kingdom of Christ, subjecting Christians again to hardship and suffering at the hands of the forces of Satan. Final deliverance comes at a moment of desperation when "the world shall be filled with the most aggravated wickedness that ever it was." Then Christ will appear with his hosts to gather the elect to their reward, but his enemies will stand "before his judgment seat with inconceivable horror and amazement, with ghastly countenances, and quaking limbs, and chattering teeth, and knees smiting one against another" as they prepare to receive their sentence. At that moment begins the "new heaven and new earth."

The sermons on the work of redemption are an important index of Edwards' public views in 1739, prima facie evidence of the role of the "Apocalypse" in his ministry, and further confirmation of the general restraint he showed in statements about controversial issues in the apocalyptic tradition. In addition, they establish indisputably the significance of time and history in his theological reflections. By the end of the 1730s Edwards possessed a new apocalyptic timetable, a considerable body of evidence that God was inclined to pour out his Spirit both locally and universally, and a continuing hope that through his ministrations the church in Northampton would blossom with a new awakening. Edwards and his congregation were primed for the return of the revivals.

The congregation in Northampton did not have long to wait. News of the evangelical successes of the Anglican itinerant George Whitefield (1714–70) began arriving in the colonies, and America prepared to receive the successful young preacher. Whitefield's tour of the colonies began near the end of October, only a few months after Edwards had completed his series of sermons on Isaiah 51. As reports of Whitefield's activities circulated, hopes soared. The contagion spread to Northampton, where Edwards was following closely the news from afar. When he heard that Whitefield planned a journey to New England, he wrote to invite the revivalist to make Northampton a stop on his itinerary, but he also warned that the region might
prove unresponsive to his preaching because it was "more hardend" than other places. Nevertheless, he expressed the desire "to see something of that Salvation of God in New-England which he has now begun, in a benighted, wicked and miserable world and age and in the most guilty of all nations." The promises of God and the reports of success led Edwards to share with Whitefield his private hope that the present moment may be "the dawning of a day of Gods mighty Power and glorious grace to the world of mankind." To that end he encouraged the itinerant to continue preaching, "that the work of God may be carried on by a Blessing on your Labours … until the Kingdom of Satan shall shake, and his proud Empire fall throughout the Earth and the Kingdom of Christ, that glorious Kingdom of Light, holiness, Peace and Love, shall be Established from one end of the Earth unto the other!" In particular, Edwards wanted his own congregation to take part in the new awakening, and he himself longed to be an "instrument" of God's glory.7 The prospect of a visit from Whitefield raised his apocalyptic fever to a new high.

The events of the following months, including Whitefield's visit to

Northampton in October of 1740, did not disappoint him. The town was again filled with the quickening in a measure surpassing the experiences of 1734–35. Edwards became a successful revivalist and eventually the most prominent American spokesman for the new evangelicalism. The months of August and September in 1741 were the "most remarkable" of the revival, according to his report, filled with "great revivings, quickenings, and comforts"; but even in February and March of the following year there was "continual commotion, day and night."8 During the busiest months he had little time for the "Apocalypse." By the end of 1742 the whole land had experienced the excitement of the Great Awakening.9

In that moment of evangelical success and high spirits, Edwards wrote the following conjecture:

'Tis not unlikely that this work of God's Spirit, that is so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind. If we consider how long since the things foretold, as what should precede this great event, have been accomplished; and how long this event has been expected by the church of God, and thought to be nigh by the most eminent men of God in the church; and withal consider what the state of things now is, and has for a considerable time been, in the church of God and world of mankind, we can't reasonably think otherwise, than that the beginning of this great work of God must be near. And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America.1

This heady proclamation published in 1743 was neither in character with Edwards' earlier pronouncements on the revivals nor totally consistent with his own private reflections. Within a short time after it was printed, he became defensive about his remarks on the millennium, insisting that they had been misunderstood—a claim that must be
checked against the full range of his comments.

In 1743 more than one motive was at work in Edwards' treatise on the revivals. On the one hand, he wanted to celebrate publicly the outpouring upon New England and affirm the religious results of the awakening. He had prayed and worked for precisely such a manifestation of God's presence among his people. Edwards would not and could not turn his back on the revival. On the other hand, the voices of the critics were growing louder as they challenged the divinity and validity of the awakening. The excesses of some with an "enthusiastical spirit" played into the hands of the opponents of the revivals. Indiscretions abounded among the itinerants and lay exhorters. Censoriousness rather than fraternity, division rather than unity, were becoming the prevailing marks of the revival. In this situation someone had to defend the awakening by affirming what was genuine in it and by restraining the radical elements that were discrediting the movement. Edwards elected to take on these tasks in his treatise on the revivals.

From C. C. Goen's analysis of Some Thoughts, it is clear that Edwards established to his own satisfaction that the revival was a glorious work of God deserving the support of all parties interested in true religion. He tried to meet the charges of the critics by suggesting that the excesses were insufficient grounds to reject the genuine manifestations of God in the awakening, but he did not deny the reality of the problem. Tactically this argument had the advantage of disarming the critics by removing the onus of extremism from the majority of those favoring the revivals. Edwards' defense was of little pastoral assistance, however, for it left the individual with the difficult task of determining what was true religion and what was not, a dilemma Edwards recognized and tried to solve in his later discourse on the religious affections. The millennial speculations in 1743 were atypical of Edwards' earlier public statements and formed only a small part of the argument of the treatise. Rather than setting to rest the charges of extremism, Some Thoughts gave a new target to the opponents of the revivals by adding the issue of the millennium.

In the treatise of 1743 Edwards expressed in public his private commitment to millennialism, although he still chose to avoid use of the term itself. He did not present a very effective case for his ideas. Most of the references to the approaching glorious times of the church are explicitly conjectural or hypothetical, even prefaced by the particle if. The concluding paragraphs in his discussion are introduced in the same conditional manner. Edwards spent much of his time belaboring the fact that it was "probable" the millennial age might begin in America, arguing the point with a strange set of reasons. For example, he explained the distant "isles" of Isaiah 60:9, which some interpreters thought a prophecy of the first fruits of the church's glorious age, as a reference to the colonies. "I can't think that anything else can be here intended but America," he wrote, although earlier in his private reflections he had explained the conversion of the isles as pointing to Europe. He argued that the division between the old world and the new, as well as the principle of fairness or equality "in the dispensations of providence," nearly compelled God to give "the honor of communicating religion in its most glorious state" to America as a representative of the new world—after all, the old world had killed Christ, too. He offered this argument in spite of the fact that he had privately reasoned that God had not finished fulfilling his promises to the Jews, and that Canaan was to be the center of the glorious kingdom of God.
(AP; below, p. 134). He also proposed that America would be the center of the coming kingdom because when God does something great for the church, he commonly begins with the weakest part in order that the last may be first—an evaluation of America in tension with his earlier praise for the first generation of settlers in New England.9

These arguments, among the most tortured in his essays, hardly represent the range of Edwards' thinking about the millennium. He seems to have been searching desperately for evidence to support his claims for the millennial role of New England's revivals. It is hard to ignore the charge of Charles Chauncy (1705–87) that Edwards' reasoning was "absolutely precarious."1 In preceding years Edwards had not

-- 029 --

allowed himself such unguarded statements about the expectations of the church. Nevertheless, at this moment pastoral concerns still motivated him: "I have thus long insisted on this point, because if these things are so, it greatly manifests how much it behooves us to encourage and promote this work, and how dangerous it will be to forbear so to do."2

A revealing footnote to his remarks on the millennium is found in Edwards' private correspondence. In a letter to William McCulloch (1691–1771) on March 5, 1744, he complained about a "slanderously reported and printed" account "that I have often said that the millennium was already begun, and that it began in Northampton." He found it especially objectionable that Chauncy had not divulged the source of the report. All of this, Edwards grumbled, "is very diverse from what I have ever said." He acknowledged that he had spoken of the revivals as "forerunners of those glorious times so often prophesied of in the Scripture, and that this was the first dawning of that light, and beginning of that work which, in the progress and issue of it, would at last bring on the church's latter-day glory." But the critics had ignored, he maintained, that he had also pointed to "many sore conflicts and terrible convulsions" and the "returns of dark clouds" before the days of prosperity for the church.3 By 1744 Edwards was smarting from the criticism directed against his published millennial speculations.

The publication of Some Thoughts brought to a close the second period of the "Apocalypse," the period in which the revivals had become the central concern of Edwards' ministry. Throughout the years from 1723 to 1743 he had continued to develop his interpretation of the Revelation in the notebook. By the end of those twenty years, his apocalyptic interest was no longer a private matter because of his leadership in the revivals and his now public commitment to millennialism.

4. The Aftermath of the Awakening: The Humble Attempt

After 1743 there were few reasons to be sanguine about the state of religion in New England. In that deteriorating situation Edwards

-- 030 --

revealed more of his private reflections on the book of Revelation when he published the Humble Attempt in 1748. His treatise, highly occasional in nature, was the culmination of many years of
study, but also the direct product of his response to the changing circumstances of the decade. In it Edwards called for united prayer, which he defended on a variety of grounds, as a remedy for the problems confronting the evangelical world. The *Humble Attempt* underscored his conception of the significance of prophecy in the life of the church and in turn provided the rationale for his principal use of the "Apocalypse" during the last ten years of his life.

Confusion presided over the religious scene in New England in the mid-1740s. The increasing decay and deadness made Edwards "very melancholy," his high hopes giving way to keen disappointment. The "glorious Things promis'd to the Church in the latter Days" had not materialized despite the prayers of the faithful and the signatures of one hundred and eleven ministers who, like Edwards, were waiting for "the Glory of the latter Days." The ecclesiastical chaos that followed in the wake of the itinerants discredited the awakening and created a centrifugal force in the churches of the land. "In many places where God of late wonderfully appeared," wrote Edwards to a friend, "he has now in a great measure withdrawn; and the consequence is, that Zion and the interest of religion are involved in innumerable and inextricable difficulties." The situation changed little during the next fifteen years; never again during his lifetime did a general awakening return to the colonies. But Edwards was not given to despair; in spite of disappointment he refused to surrender the evangelical cause and held to the hope "that God will revive his work, and that what has been so great and very extraordinary, is a forerunner of a yet more glorious and extensive work."

Edwards found a bit of comfort in reports of continuing success drifting in from widely scattered places. Some information came through the newly founded evangelical magazines operating on both sides of the Atlantic, clearinghouses for tidings about the revivals. He read carefully the pages of those public prints. Other news filtered through the network of his own correspondents, with whom he shared the watchful and hopeful posture. For example, decline appeared widespread in New England, but reports from Virginia and Maryland told of harvests by the revivalists William Robinson (d. 1746) and Samuel Buell (1716–98), to name but two. The missionary work of David Brainerd (1718–47) among the Indians of the middle colonies was noted with "those things that have a favorable aspect on the interest of religion." Edwards also derived encouragement from the letters sent by the ministers in Scotland with whom he corresponded regularly beginning in the 1740s. A community of interests existed among evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic. Through the years Edwards and the other clergymen exchanged news of revivals, discussed theological issues, including matters that impinged directly upon the interpretation of the Apocalypse, and traded books of potential interest. Intelligence of the revivals in Scotland and elsewhere lifted his sagging spirits and softened the blow dealt by the decline of the revivals in New England.

The unstable international situation of the 1740s added to the uncertain outlook for evangelicalism in America. The decade witnessed renewed hostilities among the powers of Europe in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48), which spilled over into America as King George's War (1744–48), an imperial clash between England and
the colonial powers of Spain and France. One area of conflict in North America was the southeastern coastal region where the Spanish and English conducted intermittent and indecisive raids upon each other. More persistent struggles took place in another theater, the region of Canada and the adjacent English colonies. There open warfare broke out after March 1744 when France declared war on Britain. At stake in America were territorial claims, trading rights, natural resources, and military advantages—none of these inconsequential. Edwards followed developments closely because the outcome had implications for the view of history he had shaped in his reflections on the Revelation.

For New England the most celebrated campaign of the 1740s was the effort to secure control of Cape Breton, an island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence ceded to France by the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. The French had secured their possession with a strong fort and garrison at Louisburg. Privateers from Cape Breton and from the nearby English territory of Nova Scotia freely sailed the neighboring seas, preying upon vessels of their respective enemies. New Englanders had experienced that annoyance in their trade and in their competition with the French for fisheries. When news of the declaration of war reached Cape Breton, the French commander attacked Canso, a fishing outpost on Nova Scotia. Word of the attack sent shudders through New England and served notice of an impending conflict.

Opinions were divided in New England regarding the best course of action. Robert Auchmuty (d. 1750), an agent of the Massachusetts colony in London, urged immediate attack upon Cape Breton, arguing that the benefits of control of the island would be considerable. Auchmuty's views circulated widely in the press and won support from those inclined to take the offensive. Others favored the more cautious tactic of delaying military action until the official position of the government in England was clear and its assistance assured. In January 1745 Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts proposed an attack, but the General Court refused to go along with his plan. Later the assembly reversed itself and agreed to undertake an expedition against Cape Breton as part of a wider campaign. Edwards obviously favored the decision, as his report of the affair attests. Some twenty members of the congregation in Northampton were part of the expeditionary force. Before departure, he noted, there had been "an extraordinary spirit of prayer given the people of God in New England, with respect to this undertaking, more than in any public affair within my remembrance" (below, p. 449).

From the beginning, according to Edwards, things went well for the English. The harvest of the preceding summer had been plentiful, intelligence about the defenses at Louisburg was seemingly adequate thanks to the timely return of some repatriated prisoners, and there was growing popular support for the campaign. Within two months after the decision had been made, the expedition sailed for Canada, good fortune aiding at every turn. In Edwards' view providence was smiling upon New England. On June 17, 1745, the beleaguered defenders of Louisburg surrendered to the combined forces of the colonial militia under William Pepperell and the English naval squadron commanded by Commodore Peter Warren. News of the victory brought rejoicing to New England and caused Edwards later to declare the siege and surrender of
Cape Breton "a dispensation of providence, the most remarkable in its kind, that has been in many ages." 

But providence seemed to have two faces. The joy over the success at Louisburg was soon mixed with other emotions. Word from the mother country told of a Jacobite rebellion led by the Stuart pretender to the throne. By late in the fall of 1745 the armies of Prince Charles Edward were invading England. Meanwhile the troops on Cape Breton had grown disgruntled after their victory when they were denied the right of plunder, and they had become nearly mutinous when the occupation dragged on, delaying their return home. By 1746 rumors of a great French force assembled to revenge the loss of Louisburg were circulating throughout New England. The colonies began to lay plans for another larger assault upon Canada, a campaign which never materialized. The conflict with the French spread to other areas besides Canada; outlying parts of the English colonies increasingly came under attack. For example, in late 1745 the French with their Indian allies struck with surprise and success at Saratoga, carrying away many captives. In August 1746 Fort Massachusetts in the western part of the colony fell. Few areas seemed safe from encroachment.

Edwards weighed the remarkable deliverance at Cape Breton against the new threats and on balance declared the acts of providence sufficient to convince even an infidel of the existence of God and of his beneficence: "we live," he exclaimed, "in an age, wherein divine wonders are to be expected." On the other hand, he conceded that God might be using some of the events, especially the fresh activities of the antichristian coalition—the Roman Catholic pretender and the Catholic powers of France and Spain—to chastise "the nations of Great Britain" for their vice, wickedness, and apostasy. "It is a day of great commotion and tumult among the nations," he wrote, "and what the issue will be we know not: but it now becomes us, and the church of God everywhere, to cry to him, that he would overrule all for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ, and the bringing on the expected peace and prosperity of Zion" (below, pp. 459–60).

It was prayer that Edwards singled out as an appropriate activity for those tumultuous times. In prayer, the most universal act of worship, the church asked for divine favor and at the same time affirmed the reality of the divine being. Private prayer was fundamentally a matter of devotion, but public prayer was a social action with religious and ecclesiastical implications. Edwards was persuaded that praying Christians could exert a powerful influence upon the fortunes of the church and the world.

This use of prayer was not new to Edwards; it had been an essential part of his religious exercises since childhood. Once he recalled that as young boys he and his schoolmates "joined together, and built a booth in a swamp, in a very secret and retired place, for a place of prayer." As a child he used to pray privately five times a day and often met with friends for social prayer. He described his life as continual communion with God. "And [I] was almost constantly in ejaculatory prayer, whereever I was. Prayer seem'd to be natural to me; as the breath, by which the inward burnings of my heart had vent." The topics occupying him in prayer were also those to
which he directed his study. "I had great longings," he recollected, "for the advancement of Christ's kingdom in the world. My secret prayer used to be in great part taken up in praying for it." When he faltered in his religious duties, he was not slow to chide himself. In his "Diary" for February 5, 1724, he wrote, "I have not, in times past, in my prayers, enough insisted on the glorifying of God in the world, on the advancement of the kingdom of Christ, the prosperity of the Church and the good of man." Prayer became for Edwards an essential part of the business of religion, a means whereby rational creatures could glorify their Creator.

These judgments were not novel in New England. The standard textbook of Puritan theology defined prayer as "a devout presentation of our will before God so that he may be, as it were, affected by it." Its author, William Ames (1576–1633), had stated that by its very nature prayer was a testimony to the glory and power of God. Practice followed theory in New England; public prayer was employed frequently for both religious and civil purposes. In the seventeenth century it became common practice to set aside special days for prayer appropriate to the needs or circumstances of the people, a pattern that persisted into the eighteenth century. The events of the 1740s evoked a similar response from New England.

Edwards believed that the prayers of the saints were especially instrumental in the fortunes of the church because they constitute "one great and principal means of carrying on the designs of Christ's kingdom in the world." Past experience of the church, he felt, confirmed that judgment. Therefore when the Great Awakening began to dissipate, he urged those who were interested in vital piety to pray for a new effusion of God's Spirit upon the land. Many wasted hours, he contended in 1743, might be spent profitably in such prayer:

I have often thought it would be a thing very desirable, and very likely to be followed with a great blessing, if there could be some contrivance that there should be an agreement of all God's people in America, that are well affected to this work, to keep a day of fasting and prayer to God; … to address the Father of mercies, with prayers and supplications, and earnest cries, that he would guide and direct his own people, and that he would continue and still carry on this work, and more abundantly and extensively pour out his Spirit; … and erect his glorious kingdom through the earth.

Perhaps a group of ministers might formulate a proposal for subscription by others and then make the whole affair public by printing an account of it.

On the basis of this suggestion in 1743, Edwards has been credited with originating the idea of the concert of prayer. But the notion did not begin with him; a similar plan was already in operation in Scotland before his suggestion appeared in print. A number of prayer societies in Edinburgh had combined in a movement to select a special day to pray for an outpouring of God's Spirit. The leaders circulated a public announcement of their intentions which read as follows:

Edinbr. January 21st, 1743.
Some Christian Societies in this Place who have of late observed, with no small spiritual Joy, the Outpourings of the Spirit from on High on several Corners of this wither'd Church, in Sincerity and Truth, and who long for the Coming of his Kingdom, to set a Day apart for praising and giving Thanks to his Name, for any remarkable Waterings he has given to some Spots of his Vineyard; and to pray that these may only be the Fore-runners of a plentiful Shower, to refresh the Whole.

That he would carry on this good and unexpected Work with such Power and Demonstration of the Spirit, that all Opposers, whether professed Enemies to his Kingdom, or mistaken Friends, may be at last obliged to own that it is the Doing of the Lord, and wonderful in their Eyes.

The Day proposed for this agreeable Duty is the 18th of February next.

But if that Day does not suit with the Conveniency of any of the Societies, or private Christians, that desire to keep such a Day, they may chuse another more convenient for them.

In Edinburgh a local concert preceded the larger effort of subsequent years.

Prayer societies had become prominent on both sides of the Atlantic during the revivals. These societies, nearly overlooked by historians, were an important institutional expression of the awakenings, although they were not unique to the eighteenth century. Edwards recorded the increasing concern for prayer among the converted in Northampton and charted the ups and downs of the societies in his congregation. The groups were usually homogeneous, composed of men or women, young or old, who met at designated times for corporate prayer. According to Edwards, the advancement of God's kingdom was a special concern of the societies. In later years these clusters of praying Christians provided a potential constituency for the proposed concert of prayer and a natural audience for the Humble Attempt.

Encouraged by the successes of the societies and by rising interest in a concerted effort of some kind, a group of Scottish ministers met in October 1744 and agreed to unite in prayer regularly at designated times and in quarterly meetings with the hope that God would revive his church throughout the world. Initially they did not publish their intentions, but spread the concert by private conversation and correspondence (HA; below, pp. 321–24). If successful, they planned to renew the concert and to involve a wider segment of the Christian community. John McLaurin (1693–1754), one of Edwards' earliest correspondents in Scotland, was "the chief contriver and promoter" of the union; others of his Scottish friends were also leaders of the movement.

The proposal was immediately appealing and agreeable to Edwards, who regarded the union as "exceeding beautiful, and becoming Christians" and especially appropriate to the present state of
things. God of late has shown "our weakness, infirmity, [and] insufficiency," he wrote in November 1745, and therefore "it is apparent that we can't help ourselves, and have nowhere else to go, but to God" (below, p. 445). At the same time he asked his friends in Scotland for more details about the concert.

Edwards became an organizer of the movement in America, promoting it among his acquaintances and associates. After hearing of the proposal from abroad, he introduced it to his congregation, reading parts of the letters in public and "using many arguments with them to comply with the thing proposed." Many of the prayer societies in Northampton, he reported, followed the suggestion of special quarterly days for prayer. Edwards circulated news of the affair among neighboring ministers whom he thought likely to support the plan and urged them to spread the word. He wrote to others farther away and asked them to tell him of their activities on behalf of the concert. As of November 1745, however, he had mostly discouraging news to report concerning the union. But, he added, "I shall not cease still to do what in me lies to promote and propagate it, according as favorable junctures and opportunities do present" (below, pp. 445–46). His report in May of the next year was not much more encouraging. "With respect to the Concert for Prayer, for the pouring out of the Spirit," he wrote, "the People in this Town have of late more generally fallen in with it." The last quarterly day "was pretty generally observed, in whole or part, as a Day of Prayer, in private Societies, for the forementioned Blessing." ¹ The concert was far from an overwhelming success in Northampton.

Edwards worked for the union because he saw it as a solution to the religious problems plaguing New England. In place of ecclesiastical disruption and division, the plan offered a new basis for community and harmony. Christians engaged in prayer with one another would constitute "one family, one holy and happy society." Instead of religious drought in the land, the proposal held out the hope of a new era of the Spirit. If a union of praying Christians can be realized, he asked, "who knows what it may come to at last?" Perhaps the united prayers would even "open the doors and windows of heaven, that have so long been shut up, and been as brass over the heads of the inhabitants of the earth, as to spiritual showers" (below, pp. 446–47). Edwards wrote the Humble Attempt less than a year later as another effort to foster that union. ²

The first part of the treatise contains his interpretation of the text for the discourse, Zechariah 8:20–22, and an account of the background of the concert of prayer. He explained the passage from Zechariah as a prophecy of the last prosperous times of the church on earth. Nothing in the experience of the Jews, not even the return from Babylon, and nothing in the early ages of the church has fulfilled the promises. Earlier periods of prosperity and deliverance were only types or anticipations of the last great age. According to Edwards, the future enlargement of the church will be inaugurated "by great multitudes in different towns and countries taking up a joint resolution, and coming into an express and visible agreement, that they will, by united and extraordinary prayer, seek to God that he would come and manifest himself, and grant the tokens and fruits of his gracious presence" (below, p. 314). The core of his argument for the concert was the idea that Christians must pray together for God's presence because he has withdrawn from the earth. From time to time, said Edwards, the prophets depict God as hiding from the church. At those moments the saints ought to wait for and seek God in a fervent and constant manner.
Since union among Christians is pleasing to God, he argued, the churches of America cannot reject the proposal made by the ministers in Scotland.

Edwards began his account of the concert with the meeting held in October 1744 when the Scottish ministers set up the union for a trial period. Nearly two years later they met again and agreed to renew the concert and make it a public affair. Accordingly, they drew up a Memorial which was printed and circulated among scattered evangelicals. Some five hundred copies were sent to America for distribution throughout the colonies, according to Edwards. He included the text of the Memorial in the *Humble Attempt*.

The Memorial stated the rationale, objectives, and method of the concert. Its authors urged those agreeing with the proposal to publicize their cooperation. They especially encouraged ministers and teachers to publish "short and nervous scriptural persuasives and directions to the duty in view" and "to preach frequently on the importance and necessity of prayer for the coming of our Lord's kingdom" (HA; below, p. 326). The concert was not confined to "any particular denomination or party," but was inclusive in design, intended for all who had the interest of Christianity at heart.

In Part II of the treatise Edwards marshalled a variety of reasons for participating in the concert of prayer. The *Humble Attempt* was his answer to the call for "scriptural persuasives"; its basic line of argumentation was exegetical. Pointing to unfulfilled prophecies in the Bible, Edwards reasoned that the kingdom of God awaits a time of future prosperity greater than it has experienced in the past. The church of God has never been as extensive as it is depicted in the passages of the Old Testament which speak of its filling the entire world, surpassing all other monarchies in extent, and embracing the people of all nations. Nor have the New Testament prophecies about the universality of Christ's kingdom or its long duration been fulfilled. The church on earth has never included the fullness of the Jews and the Gentiles; nor has it witnessed a protracted period of prosperity. Christ's kingdom is to follow the destruction of Antichrist, an event which has not been completed, according to Edwards. Earlier ages have been mere anticipations of the glorious day.

The future kingdom of Christ, wrote Edwards, will be a paradise restored in which God will be "eminently glorified" and his people "unspeakably happy" (HA; below, p. 337). Knowledge and holiness will cover the earth when religion prevails again. The poor will become princes, and kings will bow as servants. Peace, love, and harmony will rule among the saints, false teaching and divisions will disappear from the churches, and superstition will give way to the pure worship of God. The family of man will be one and act as one, all members living as brothers. Prosperity, health, and long life will bring extraordinary joy to all beings on earth and in heaven. Surely, exhorted Edwards, such an ideal situation deserves the prayers of the church.
A further incentive to pray for the Spirit, according to Edwards, is the example of Christ who devoted his life and death to the goal of securing that blessing for his followers. He gave the Spirit to the church in small portions during earlier ages, but in the latter days he will bestow it in great abundance. Even if that age extends for only a thousand years, it will witness the greatest increase of the saints in history. It is possible, conjectured Edwards, that a hundred thousand times more converts will enter the church during the millennium than in all the ages since creation—a fitting end, in his view, to the activities of Christ's kingdom (HA; below, p. 343).

The "whole creation," wrote Edwards, is waiting for the day on which it will be delivered from the bondage brought by sin. Like a woman in labor, the universe struggles to be released from its unnatural bonds. The creatures of the universe were made for good ends by the Creator, and he will restore them to their proper functions in the future age of the church. The present commotions in the world serve a higher ultimate purpose, as the pains of travail precede the joys of birth. In the meantime all creatures wait and pray for that day.

In Edwards' view, the Bible is filled with "precepts, encouragements, and examples" stressing the necessity of prayer for the Spirit of God. In fact, he said, the people of God ought to be "importunate" in seeking that blessing. Repeatedly the Psalms and the Prophets depict deliverance as following the prayers of the faithful. The Scriptures suggest that when prayer fills the church, God is likely to answer the requests of his saints. Perhaps the present generation, Edwards speculated, is the one spoken of in the promises, for the prophecies describe the people as "destitute." Edwards judged the church at his time "in very low, sorrowful and needy circumstances" (HA; below, p. 352). At precisely such moments God commands his people to pray, and he stands ready to hear the cry for mercy. God is prepared to restore the church when he perceives that it earnestly seeks his Spirit.

Edwards viewed the contemporary situation as additional motivation to participate in the concert. The long list of evils threatening the world—the present "bloody war," the wickedness and vice filling the land and the nation, the infidelity and blasphemy of the age, the general contempt for religion, the decline of "vital piety," the struggles in the churches, the loss of respect for the ministry, the neglect of the ordinances, the lack of church discipline, and the religious excesses of all kinds—should compel the people of God to pray for a manifestation of the Spirit. Alongside these negative incentives for prayer there existed remarkable providences which were cause for Christians to believe that God will not let his church suffer forever—positive encouragements to pray. Most notable among these were the success at Cape Breton, the deliverances from subsequent French efforts on land and sea, the restoration of captives from Canada, and the recent revivals in the land. The evidences of mercy, Edwards believed, should evoke thanksgiving and prayer.

Edwards urged his readers to comply with the proposal for all of these reasons and for one more: the union of praying Christians will be beautiful, he said, because unity itself is "amiable" and consistent with God's plan for the creation. When the church throughout the world, diverse as it is, acts as one family, it is a mark of glory for its Head. By the act of united prayer the fractured
church manifests the reality of the "body of Christ" (HA; below, p. 366). Spiritual union will lead to better relations among the separate parts of the church. Thus for Edwards the concert of prayer was both a means to an end and an end in itself.

The third and longest part of the \textit{Humble Attempt} is a defense of the concert against a number of objections, practical and theoretical. The union in prayer had not been very successful in America during the two-year trial period. In the last section of the treatise Edwards dealt with some of the apparent reasons for that lack of success.

In answer to the charge that the designation of special days for regular observance was an imposition upon the consciences of men—a criticism Protestants traditionally leveled against the worship of the Roman Catholic Church—Edwards insisted the concert intended no such burden. The authors of the Memorial had no authority over the participants; they even recommended altering the pattern of observance wherever necessary or desirable. Surely no serious objection, Edwards said, can be made against establishing times and places for common prayer; otherwise all social worship is precluded. The principle of good order demands similar provisions. Furthermore, public fast days have never been subject to this criticism.

The concert is not "whimsical," contended Edwards. The proposal does not rest upon the assumption that God is more likely to hear prayers because they are offered at the same time. United prayer is beneficial for other reasons, principally because it promotes the unity of scattered Christians and nurtures confidence among them. Visible acts of worship, including corporate prayer, glorify God and encourage the saints by building mutual affection among the participants. "There is no wisdom," he philosophized, "in finding fault with human nature" (HA; below, p. 375).

Edwards rejected the epithet of "Pharisaism" as inappropriate for the concert. It makes no sense, he argued, to say that those who pray together publicly are making a show of their religious activities; the concert is not designed to restrict involvement to a small group, but rather to embrace as many people as possible. If the charge were valid, all special worship activities, whether fast days or days of thanks-giving, would be pharisaical. Nor is the idea of a concert new, he noted. The duty of prayer for the Spirit has been constant in the church, and Christians in many ages have appointed days for special worship.

Two other objections Edwards regarded as potentially more threatening to the cause of the concert, and he responded to both in greater detail, drawing directly upon his earlier reflections in the "Apocalypse." The first concerned the time for the beginning of Christ's future kingdom. Some interpreters of the Revelation on the basis of the hardships inflicted upon the witnesses in the vision of Revelation 11, concluded that the future kingdom would follow an age of calamity for the church. Edwards, however, believed that their interpretation undermined the objectives of the concert and inevitably dampened their zeal for prayer, for if they prayed for the coming of the kingdom, they would be hastening upon themselves the age of persecution, according to their scheme. He tried to meet this difficulty at its root, namely, the interpretation of the account of the
witnesses. He declared that the witnesses, representing the faithful, had been slain in the days before the Reformation. The church was then at its lowest point in the time of the crusades against the Waldenses and the Albigenses. The destruction of Antichrist began with the reformers, and now the church of Christ is gradually gaining ascendancy over her enemies as the vials are being poured out. God will not sacrifice these gains,

- 044 -

Edwards affirmed; nor will he return the saints to the earlier depths. The influence of the Antichrist has been permanently shaken, and the light of the gospel is dispelling the forces of the kingdom of darkness. The efforts of the Antichrist to defeat Protestantism have failed.

According to Edwards, these same interpreters misrepresent other parts of the Apocalypse. They confound the accounts of the battles between the forces of Antichrist and of Christ. In the Revelation there are two great battles, not one, which are depicted very differently in the visions. In the first the beast triumphs (Revelation 11), but the church of Christ is victorious in the second (Revelation 16 and Revelation 19). The second battle is the greater event in the book of Revelation, in Edwards' view. The commentators mistakenly confuse the meaning of the three woes (Revelation 9-3) will end. Let it suffice to point out, Edwards suggested, that God in the past has sometimes shortened the days of the church's suffering and certainly can do so again. The rationale of the proposed concert, he maintained, was not inconsistent with a correct interpretation of the Revelation.

The other serious objection to which Edwards addressed himself was based upon the calculation of Moses Lowman that the fall of the Antichrist would not occur until after the year 2000. In defense of the concert Edwards parted company with Lowman, whose work he had earlier openly admired. He attacked Lowman's interpretation because of its negative implications for prayer. Edwards charged that it is not reasonable to assume that God has revealed an exact date for Christ's coming in his kingdom (HA; below, p. 395). In fact, he has kept the matter hidden; nevertheless, he wants the church to pray that the kingdom come soon. There is an irony in this reprimand by Edwards in view of his own longstanding fascination with apocalyptic speculation. Even though he believed that the precise time of the fall of the Antichrist and the beginning of the kingdom had not been revealed, he was unwilling to place it far into the future. On the imminence of Christ's return he thought a majority of expositors agreed.

Edwards maintained that Lowman was mistaken in his identification of Constantine as one of the heads of the beast (Revelation 12:3), a part of the alliance of Satan against the church. He regarded Constantine as God's chosen vessel who had protected the saints from the heathen empire.

- 045 -

For him Constantine's appearance was a pivotal event in the history of the church. Edwards also contended that Lowman had miscalculated the beginning of the 1260 years of the reign of Antichrist and consequently had incorrectly identified the preceding world power. The beginning of the reign of Antichrist was more likely in 456 than in 756 since it was a time of spiritual
domination, not temporal sovereignty. The latter he found inconsistent with the tone and intention of the book of Revelation. Therefore the rule of Antichrist was not fixed geographically to the city of Rome, as Lowman had suggested.

In order to discredit the basic assumptions on which Lowman rested his dating of the reign of Antichrist, Edwards took aim at the heart of his interpretation, the system of successive periods. Lowman's scheme, he wrote, "seems to me to be more ingenious than solid, and that many things might be said to demonstrate it not to be founded in the truth of things, and the real design of the divine author of this prophecy" (HA; below, p. 406). Lowman's association of the Saracens with both the fifth and sixth trumpets ignored the place and function of the Turks in western history—a clear distortion in Edwards' eyes. Lowman was inconsistent in allowing the period of the trumpets to close with conflicting events, the peace of the church and the rise of the Antichrist. These and other criticisms Edwards had noted earlier in his "Remarks on Lowman" (AP; below, pp. 251–52). By 1748 therefore he was challenging the leading features of Lowman's interpretation of the Revelation.

Edwards' own view of the fall of Antichrist underscored the gradualness of the historical process. With the fall of ancient Babylon as a prototype for God's activity, he hypothesized that a remnant of the Church of Rome may remain active in the world after the beginning of the destruction of Antichrist under the sixth vial. Perhaps the finishing stroke against the antichristian kingdom that leads directly to the millennium will come as late as Lowman suggests, namely, at the beginning of the "seventh thousand years," as many Jewish and Christian divines have argued (HA; below, p. 410). The destruction of the Antichrist is only one of the signs to be fulfilled before the millennium begins. Edwards complicated his apocalyptic timetable with this suggestion that the age of the Spirit might precede the millennium by a considerable distance in time. Even with the best of luck, he speculated, progress in the church will probably not be great enough for the millennium to begin until the year 2000. Here, some five years after he had

published the bold prediction about the imminence of the millennium Edwards withdrew that conjecture and returned to his earlier interpretation of the dating of the future glorious age.

But this apocalyptic reversal was no cause to neglect the concert. Edwards believed that an effusion of the Spirit is to accompany the destruction of the Antichrist under the sixth vial. God will destroy the new Babylon, the antichristian church, in the same manner as he did the ancient city—by drying up the river Euphrates. The "river" which serves mystical Babylon performs the same function as that which ran through literal Babylon of old. The river symbolizes the various revenues of the Roman Catholic Church and the wealth of the Catholic empires. When these supplies are dried up, the Antichrist will be weakened and ready for the final blow under the seventh vial. The sixth is a preparatory vial. Simultaneous with the weakening of the Antichrist will be the removal of other obstacles that have impeded the progress of Christ's kingdom, such as false doctrines and practices, divisions and contentions in the church. The saints have good reason to unite in the concert of prayer, for it seems evident, said Edwards, that "if the 6th vial han't already begun to be poured out, it may well be speedily expected" (HA; below, p. 421). Some fulfillment is apparent already from the changing relationship between the Pope and the
Roman Catholic countries. The remarkable providences in North America, the reverses in South America, the losses of France in the East—these are portents of the impending destruction of the Antichrist. Even if the final destruction is distant, joint prayer may spark a revival which will further weaken the antichristian kingdom in the present age. Edwards concluded the *Humble Attempt* by reiterating his plea for compliance: surely no one, he exhorted, can reject this overture.

Within a month after he had submitted the text of the *Humble Attempt* to the printer, Edwards substantially changed the function of the "Apocalypse." In late 1747 he began to use the notebook as an apocalyptic ledger. In one list he collected contemporary evidence of the fulfillment of the sixth vial. He searched newspapers and magazines and listened to reports from afar in the hope of documenting the reduction of the revenues and riches of the papacy. Through the next years he watched with delight the misfortunes of the Catholic powers—commercial, political, social, and military—confident that they betokened the approach of better times for the church. In a second list of contemporary events, Edwards tallied evangelical successes throughout the world, entering accounts culled from his reading, his correspondence and his own experience. He was convinced that the church would begin to prosper while her enemies suffered under the last three vials. Conversions of Indians, Jews, or Turks excited special attention because of traditional associations with those late stages in the apocalyptic timetable. Edwards was not the only evangelical watching contemporary events, but it is a striking measure of the significance he attached to these affairs that he persisted with this apocalyptic bookkeeping throughout the years of great personal stress and turmoil, the period of the controversy in Northampton leading to his dismissal from his congregation. Perhaps his perception of the fulfillment of prophecy provided him some comfort in the midst of his own troubles.

The publication of the *Humble Attempt* was not Edwards' last effort to promote the concert of prayer. In subsequent years, as he kept his private record in the "Apocalypse," he continued to solicit public support for the union. For example, he sent Joseph Bellamy a copy of the *Humble Attempt* and requested, "Send me word whether the proposal for united prayer be complied with in your parts." His letters to friends in Scotland between 1747 and 1749 contained numerous references to the concert and to the general state of religion. Edwards functioned as an exchange point for information among evangelicals in America and abroad. He believed that the sharing of intelligence about scattered revivals was itself a means of grace. In mid-1749 he wrote:

I was at the pains to extract from all the letters I received at that time, those things which appeared with a favourable aspect on the interest of religion in the world, and to draw various copies to send to different parts, to such as I supposed would be most likely to be entertained and improved by them, and to do good with them, and I believe they have been of great benefit, particularly to excite and encourage God's people, in the great duty of praying.
for the coming of Christ's kingdom, and to promote extraordinary, united prayer in the method proposed in the Memorial from Scotland.²

In those years Edwards thought the concert was beginning to prosper in America, despite the fact that it was "in general a very dead time as to religion, and a time of the prevailing of all manner of iniquity."³ Perhaps the concert did have some limited success in the colonies, but nothing comparable to the vision which had informed its authors and had filled the theological imagination of Edwards as he wrote in support of the Memorial.⁴ The same might be said of the *Humble Attempt*. In mid-1749 Bellamy confided to Thomas Foxcroft that "to this day I beleive not half the Country have ever So much as heard of Mr. Edwards peice upon the *Scotland Concert*."⁵ The concert and the treatise were far from successful in America. By the end of the 1740s Edwards' expectations for Christ's kingdom were also considerably more measured than his earlier prognostications.

5. A Theology of the Apocalypse

The "Apocalypse" was slated for one more use by Edwards, a project he sketched in a letter to the trustees of the College of New Jersey in October 1757 after he had been invited to assume the presidency of that fledgling institution. Writing from Stockbridge on the western frontier of Massachusetts where he had assumed a pastorate in 1751, Edwards enumerated several reasons for his hesitancy to accept the offer, including his plan for "a great work" of divinity in a "new method." For a long time, he confided, he had set his "mind and heart" on writing

```
-- 049 --
```

a *History of the Work of Redemption* in which he would consider the whole of Christian theology in historical perspective. He proposed to examine "the grand design of God" as well as "all parts of the grand scheme" from eternity to the "consummation of all things; when it shall be said, *It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End.*" The materials in the "Apocalypse" were earmarked for this body of divinity because Edwards intended to deal with all successive dispensations in time, relying when necessary upon "history or prophecy."⁶

This proposed body of divinity was to be more than the series of sermons preached in 1739 and published posthumously under the name of the projected work. Edwards' plan called for a different method in which "doctrinal observations and dissertations" would be placed in "large MARGINAL NOTES at the bottom of the page."⁷ Tentatively he had selected Deuteronomy 33:26 as a text for the treatise: "There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth on the heavens in thy help, and in his excellency on the sky."⁸ The universe, he explained, is like a "chariot in which God rides and makes progress towards the last end of all things." Deuteronomy 33:26, according to Edwards, signified "as much as that God governs the whole world for the good of his church … and every event in the universe is in subserviency to their help and benefit."⁹ Edwards proposed to write theology in the form of universal history. Quite probably the "Extracts from Lowman" were compiled with this plan in mind, together with other notes he was taking; the excerpts would supply basic data for the historical framework of the discourse.¹

```
-- 050 --
```
The "History of Redemption" promised to be a final public expression of his lifetime of interest in the Apocalypse, the principal repository of prophecy, in his view, in the possession of the New Testament church. The sequence of the visions in the book of Revelation offered a natural organizational scheme for part of the proposed discourse. Edwards apparently planned such a use of the prophecy. In one of the project notebooks he wrote: "Another thing in these latter ages, which greatly makes way for the setting up of the glorious kingdom of Christ, is the remarkable diminishing of the ecclesiastical revenues of popish countries. Here shew this is the fulfilling of the SIXTH VIAL." The contents of the "Apocalypse" were to be integrated into the body of divinity, a fitting conclusion for his reflections on the book of Revelation.

The sudden death of Edwards in 1758 left this project an unfulfilled promise. His death had another related but less obvious effect: the failure to complete the "History of Redemption" masked the significance of the apocalyptic factor in Edwards' theology by relegating much of the evidence of his commitment to biblical prophecy, including the "Apocalypse," to near oblivion. This edition is one step toward correcting that situation.

By the 1750s Edwards possessed a coherent theology of the Apocalypse, the product of many years of reflection and writing. Both the beginning and the end of history, according to him, fall within the theological perspective of the book of Revelation. All has proceeded from God by his pleasure, and ultimately all will return to him again. God's design for the universe was a product of his goodness, which he chose to communicate through the creation. When rebellion blemished the creation, he determined to accomplish his ends through the work of Christ and the influence of his Spirit in the church. God directed the forces of nature and the events of history toward his objectives. Edwards was unbending in his commitment to the doctrine of providence, the natural extension of God's creative power throughout time. The doctrine of providence rested upon the twin assumptions of divine sovereignty and sufficiency. The special object of providential care was the church, guided at every moment, in good times and bad, by God's power, wisdom, justice, and mercy.

Within this larger context the study of the Apocalypse became more than a matter of speculation about exegetical curiosities. Edwards' concern with the interpretation of the book of Revelation was itself a theological affirmation of sorts because it required of him confidence that the word of prophecy was a reliable guide for the affairs of the church. Apocalyptic speculation rested upon the presupposition that God had made known his intentions for the future in the book of Revelation and that in time he would unlock the secrets for his people on earth. Therefore probing the mysteries of the book and correlating the prophecies with events in the life of the church constituted for Edwards a way of formulating statements about the sovereignty and sufficiency of God far more weighty than the details of the visions suggested. Conjectures and calculations about the Apocalypse were not idle amusements, but serious theological business. Concern with prophecy in Edwards' view was a mark of commitment and faith.

In the same manner, Edwards' fixation upon the Antichrist and the activities of his kingdom was more than simply an expression of a culturally conditioned animosity or some kind of private
preoccupation—although for Edwards it also may have involved a bit of both. In his theology of the Apocalypse the descriptions of the dangers facing the church from the antichristian forces played an additional theological role by compelling the saints to reflect upon the magnitude of the redemption effected by God on their behalf. Although the hatred and bigotry implicit in the negative judgments about the Roman Catholic Church were not mitigated one iota by this theological function, nevertheless

-- 052 --

the constant concern with the beast was a subtle way of paying tribute to the God who triumphed over clever and unscrupulous enemies despite tremendous obstacles. Edwards' persistent attacks upon the Antichrist's claims and abuses were an affirmation of the truth of the divine attributes and accomplishments. For him the reality of the divine was mirrored even in the counterfeits of the beasts.

It is impossible to ignore the christological focus in Edwards' theology of the Apocalypse. Christ was the agent of the work of redemption through his life, death, and resurrection. His coming to earth brought an end to the earlier dispensations, and his ascension inaugurated the latter days of the church when all things ultimately will be restored. As the principal actor in the covenant of grace, he fulfilled the former promises of God and was himself the promise of things to come. Theologically, the figure of the Lamb dominated the drama of the Apocalypse. The sacrifice of Christ, arranged in an eternal covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son, was effectual for all mankind. But the Son first suffered and then triumphed; so too his kingdom will experience hardship before the subsequent moments of glory. The Lamb that was slain in the visions, declared Edwards, is eventually victorious over the enemies of his church and will conduct his spouse to the glories of heaven.

In Edwards' view of the Apocalypse, Christ and the church were intimately related. As he was the primary agent of salvation, so the church—Christ mystical—upon his departure from the earth became the instrument through which the plan of God is carried forward. Those who experience grace in conversion unite with Christ and thereby share his suffering and glory. The union with Christ sustains and nurtures the church militant on earth, where suffering is common. But God has promised that the fortunes of believers will brighten in anticipation of the eternal glory of the church triumphant. As the bride of Christ, chaste and beautiful, the saints reject sin and seek holiness; they pray for his Spirit and attend upon the ordinances. In this manner the church of Christ increases and spreads over the earth until the kingdom is universal. Then it can be said that the saints rule with Christ. After that, the Son delivers the kingdom to his Father, and the marriage of the Lamb is consummated in heaven.

In his theological reflections on the Apocalypse, Edwards tried to

-- 053 --

hold in balance the dual eschatological themes of earthly prosperity and heavenly glory—sometimes a difficult task. According to his understanding of the divine economy, the restoration of all things takes place gradually, from the time of the first promise of God through
the various dispensations of salvation history. During the glorious age of the increase of the gospel, the earth will be restored to its primitive condition, or to at least a degree of it. Here Edwards was drawing heavily upon the Old Testament prophecies in the book of Isaiah. But the new creation will not be complete until God inaugurates the "new heaven and new earth," the eternal dwelling place of the saints. There the glory of God will be fully manifested, and the saints will live in bliss. Admittedly, at times it is difficult to distinguish the glories of one dispensation from those of another in Edwards' scheme because each anticipates the next, but he was never at a loss to identify his ultimate goal. Speaking of the "new heaven and new earth" described in Revelation 21:1, he wrote:

It is the last that is said of the church, in this series of prophecies: 'tis set here as the end of all the foregoing revolutions, the highest reward of all their labors [and] sufferings, and the ultimate aim of all these wonderful successive dispensations of divine providence spoken of in the former part of the world. 'Tis after the general judgment, and manifestly different from the millennium (AP; below, pp. 141–42).

For him the eternal glory was the final goal of Christians. The accent upon the eternal rewards of grace did not remove the Christian from matters of earthly responsibility, in Edwards' opinion. In fact, the apocalyptic perspective heightened the pressures upon the Christian life, for God accomplishes his work of redemption through the human instrumentalities of the church by preaching, prayer, and the other ordinances.

Salvation is a progressive matter for Edwards. Christ's kingdom advances through time, but not in a straight line. The theme of restoration implies that progress in the work of redemption is circular in nature, bringing all things back to God, the initial point of departure. The final objective of the kingdom is not the exaltation of man, but the glorification of God, which was the original goal of creation too. It is God who rides in the chariot, not men. Edwards' related themes of providence and universal restoration are controlling concepts in his theological perspective. God governs the totality of human experience. All must submit to his will and give him glory; "so there is nothing happens, except God first give the word" (AP; below, p. 120). Edwards chose the image of the wheel as a most apt representation of divine providence. All things in course, like a wheel, begin at one point and in time return to that point again. The events in the ages of the universe may be symbolized, he wrote, by a great wheel which goes through one revolution. "In the beginning of this revolution all things come from God, and are formed out of a chaos; and in the end, all things shall return into a chaos again, and shall return to God, so that he that is the Alpha, will be the Omega."\(^3\) This vision of the beginning and the end controls Edwards' theology of the Apocalypse.

6. Edwards' Sources

Edwards spent a lifetime studying the book of Revelation, but the "Apocalypse" and the Humble Attempt reflect only a part of his investigations. The "Catalogue," that intriguing but uncharted
map of his reading, provides additional clues to the full extent of his acquaintance with apocalyptic literature. It is the "Catalogue" that reveals his unending quest for books on a variety of subjects and establishes the fact that he obtained access to far more than he had in his own library. From his reading list it is apparent that Edwards knew and perhaps read the commentaries of William Whiston, Isaac Newton, Charles Daubuz, and John Lightfoot, that he was acquainted with the histories of Robert Millar and John Perrin, both anti-Catholic in perspective, and that he studied the volumes of Robert Fleming and Thomas Bray for themes related to the book of Revelation. None of these works was cited directly in the "Apocalypse" or in the Humble Attempt, but they constitute a part of Edwards' intellectual background. His other exegetical notebooks, especially the "Scripture" and the "Blank Bible," fill in the contours of his reading by showing that he had studied the works of Samuel Bochart, Francis Potter, Thomas Goodwin, Philip Doddridge, and many others on apocalyptic topics.4

The sources Edwards did cite in the "Apocalypse" and the Humble Attempt include a commentary on the book of Revelation, two popular annotations on the entire Bible, a number of historical volumes dealing with antiquity and Christian history, polemical works, some occasional tracts, religious magazines of the day, and newspapers—a representative cross section of his reading on apocalyptic issues. Only a few of the authors are widely known; most remain obscure figures, probably recognized by their contemporaries as much for their piety as for their scholarship, forgotten today outside the circle of those researching religious history. Collectively these sources shaped Edwards' interpretation of the Revelation.5

Moses Lowman (1680–1752)

The volume Edwards cited most often in both the "Apocalypse" and the Humble Attempt was the Paraphrase and Notes on the Revelation by the Englishman Moses Lowman.6 Lowman's life followed a pattern similar to that of many dissenting clergymen of his day. After studying theology at Leyden and Utrecht on the Continent, he served a congregation at Clapham in an unpretentious manner from 1710 until his death. His first love was "the study of his Bible," an activity he pursued with "unwearied application and diligence." By his scholarship he became "well known to the learned world."7 In addition to the commentary on the Revelation, Edwards knew Lowman's Dissertation on the Civil Government of the Hebrews (1740), an exposition of the nature and function of the theocracy of ancient Israel. Lowman shared the strong anti-Catholic feelings of English Nonconformity, a sentiment he voiced in the sermon entitled The Principles of Popery Schismatical (1735).

Edwards first learned of the Paraphrase and Notes in 1737 through his uncle William Williams (1665–1741), who had heard from Benjamin Colman about a forthcoming exposition of the Revelation by a certain "Laman," a "work that was then adoing concerning which there was great expectation."8 Edwards lost little time in securing a copy of the
commentary, which he had in hand by mid-1738. In it he believed that he had found the best available interpretation of the Apocalypse, a volume that seemed tailor-made for his overlapping interests in history, chronology, and prophecy. Even the format pleased him: Lowman separated the text of the Revelation and an expository paraphrase of it, homiletical in character, from more technical scholarly comments in the footnotes. The notes included interpretations by earlier commentators, Lowman's own translations of difficult passages, and a range of supplementary information. Lowman added long excursuses on the historical periods represented by the visions of the Apocalypse, drawing upon both ecclesiastical and secular historians.

The first quotation from Lowman in the "Apocalypse," no. 74 in the series, was written in late 1738 or early 1739. After that, references to the Paraphrase and Notes become common in the numbered series as well as in Edwards' other biblical notebooks. For example, no. 78 in the "Apocalypse" refers to the "judicious" Lowman (below, p. 187). The first entry in the second manuscript of the "Scripture," no. 291, contains a direct reference to the commentary. In the series of sermons preached during 1739 Edwards cites approvingly the opinions of "a certain very late expositor" on the pouring out of the vials. It was at the point of the fifth vial that Edwards' early apocalyptic calculations and Lowman's scheme of interpretation intersected. They agreed that the Reformation was the last predicted event in the visions which had already taken place, but they differed on the number of the vial that it represented. Edwards had associated the sixteenth-century Reformation with the second vial; Lowman linked it with the fifth. The two concurred, however, that another vial was soon to be poured.

Lowman's explanation of the visions appealed to his readers in part because it was straightforward. The first two chapters of the book of Revelation, according to him, told of the church at the time of the Seer himself. The balance of the Apocalypse described "the things that shall be hereafter, or to the State of the Church in the Ages to come, after the time of the Vision, with Cautions and Exhortations suitable to it." Seven successive periods follow in the life of the church, according to Lowman's scheme. The first three of the seven correspond to the times of the seals, the trumpets, and the vials, those traditional conundrums confronting every interpreter of the book of Revelation. The period of the seals is the time of the church under the heathen Roman emperors, that of the trumpets extends from the reign of Constantine to the end of the Islamic invasions of the West with the victory of Charles Martel in the eighth century, and the era of the vials is the 1260 years the church suffers at the hands of the papacy. During the third period a faithful remnant of the saints persists, although they are sorely persecuted, and the destruction of the enemies of the church is gradually accomplished beginning with the commotions among the family of Charlemagne in 830 and culminating in the total ruin of mystical Babylon after the year 2000. Then comes the millennium, but after that follows a brief rebellion led by Satan. Christ crushes the revolt, and the final judgment ensues. Eternity begins for the saints and the reprobates, in heaven and hell respectively.

One of Lowman's contemporaries said of his explanation of the prophecies that it was "formed upon a plan properly his own, … and if in some instances his observations may not be thought so clear and convincing, it is no more than what may be affirmed of all the learned men, who have
wrote on that difficult subject, and what I apprehend will be the case of all who shall attempt to unfold those mysteries, even to the end of the world."\(^3\) In 1739 Edwards found the scheme persuasive and quickly altered some of his own earlier views that conflicted with the interpretation. Some seven years later he filled nearly forty pages of the "Apocalypse" with extensive citations from Lowman's historical accounts, evidence of the continuing impact of the \textit{Paraphrase and Notes} upon him.\(^4\)

But Edwards did not agree with Lowman on every point in the explanation of the book of Revelation. In a brief section of the "Apocalypse" entitled "Remarks on Lowman," he offered a number of explicit criticisms of the scheme. He disagreed with the denial of synchronisms, observing that such repetitions are the "method of almost all the prophecies of Scripture" (AP; below, p. 251). Here Edwards was siding With Joseph Mede in the tradition. He disputed Lowman's correlation of the three woes under the last three trumpets with the various manifestations of the Saracen menace. The woes progressively destroy the enemies of the church, Edwards observed, not the church herself.

--- 058 ---

Seven Periods of the Apocalypse

According to Moses Lowman

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seals</td>
<td>Trumpets</td>
<td>Vials</td>
<td>Millennium</td>
<td>Satan Loosed</td>
<td>Judgment Day</td>
<td>New Heavens and New Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Seals</td>
<td>II Trumpets</td>
<td>III Vials</td>
<td>1. 95–100 Christianity Prevails</td>
<td>1. 337–379 Intra-imperial Wars</td>
<td>1. 830–988 Commotion in Empire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. 100–138 Destruction of Jews</td>
<td>2. 379–412 Invasion of Italy</td>
<td>2. 1040–1190 Crusades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. 270–304 Diocletian's Persecution</td>
<td>5. 568–675 Rise of Mohammedanism</td>
<td>5. 1560–1650 Reformation, Turks, and Disease</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. 1850–2016 Utter Ruin of Roman Power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

--- 059 ---

Finally, he questioned the exegesis of the seventh trumpet as introducing an interlude of peace and prosperity for the church, although the earlier woes had brought suffering on the saints.
These criticisms Edwards developed more fully in his defense of the concert of prayer in the *Humble Attempt* (below, pp. 389–94).

The *Paraphrase and Notes* exerted a powerful influence upon Edwards' interpretation of the Revelation and had a direct impact upon the nature of the "Apocalypse." It was Lowman who persuaded Edwards to push forward his own interpretive scheme: the fifth vial had been poured and the sixth was impending—thereby preparing the logical and exegetical ground for him to begin assembling evidence related to the fulfillment of the sixth vial. Lowman confirmed Edwards in his conviction that the lowest days of the church were past and the times were becoming increasingly favorable for the saints.

Matthew Poole (1624–79)

Matthew Poole was a seventeenth-century exegete and biblical annotator whose massive tomes were highly prized by many New England divines, including Edwards. He was educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where his tutor was John Worthington (1618–71), the editor of the works of Joseph Mede. Following the restoration of the monarchy and passage of the Act of Uniformity in 1662, he resigned the only ecclesiastical living he ever held, a rectorship in London, and lived thereafter by means of a patrimony. Poole invested some of his energies in polemics: he attacked the Unitarian cause, championed simplicity in public worship, and challenged the claims of the Roman Catholic Church. Two of his anti-Catholic publications, *The Nullity of the Romish Faith* (1666) and *A Dialogue between a Popish Priest and an English Protestant* (1667), produced a threat of assassination which forced him to flee to Amsterdam, where he later died.

Edwards was familiar with another side of Poole's endeavors, his biblical commentaries. In 1666 Poole began compiling the *Synopsis Criticorum aliorumque Sacrae Scripturae Interpretum*, a work eventually published in five folios, the product of more than ten years of labor.\(^5\) Intended as a compilation of the best scholarship on the Bible, his massive commentary incorporated studies by English Protestants, continental scholars, Roman Catholic commentators, and Jewish rabbis. It was partially dependent upon an earlier but equally massive *Critici Sacri*, a dependence that caused considerable difficulty in obtaining publication rights.\(^6\) The *Synopsis*, written in Latin for the use of scholars and divines, provided a wealth of critical and technical information. In the section on the book of Revelation, Poole surveyed more than forty authorities and sources, summarizing viewpoints and interpretations, but allowing differences to stand side by side. His exposition of the Apocalypse occupies more than five hundred and fifty columns.\(^7\) The *Synopsis* received widespread acclaim during Poole's lifetime and was regarded by many as without peer in scope and sophistication.

After completing the *Synopsis* in 1676, Poole turned to another project he had contemplated for many years, a plan for providing unlearned Christians with aids for scriptural study. He died before finishing the popular commentary, but a group of interested ministers continued the plan and within a few years published two folios entitled *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*.\(^8\) The
exposition of the Apocalypse was written by John Collinges (1623–90), like Poole a graduate of Emmanuel College and a Presbyterian divine. This work was not simply an English translation of the Synopsis; it had a different rationale, namely, to give "the plain sense of the Scripture, and to reconcile seeming contradictions where they occurred, and … to open Scripture by Scripture."\(^9\) The Annotations offered the reader a statement on the canonical authority of each book, a discussion of the intention of the author, and an English translation of the text with notes and commentary. The Annotations joined a growing tradition of popular commentaries committed to the Protestant ideal of placing the Bible into the hands of the common people.\(^1\)

Edwards became acquainted with both the Synopsis and the Annotations as a young man. The former he noted on the letter sheet inserted in the "Catalogue": "Poole's Synopsis on the Apocalypse." There was a copy of the latter in Timothy Edwards' household, as the eulogy for Edwards' sister Jerusha attests.\(^2\) Edwards apparently used the Annotations in the "Apocalypse" when he was writing the chapter by chapter exposition and the early entries in the numbered series (cf. below, p. 125). It is more difficult to establish a direct dependence upon the Synopsis in the "Apocalypse."\(^3\) Both the Annotations and the Synopsis were concerned with the issues occupying his earliest reflections on the book of Revelation. Poole had underscored the insidious nature of the Antichrist and the antichristian forces, expounding at great length the dangers facing the church at the hands of her enemies and detailing the sufferings of the Christians who had been persecuted and martyred. His chronological discussions may have encouraged Edwards to become more specific in his own apocalyptic calculations.

Poole introduced Edwards to many of the leading commentators in the tradition by summarizing their views on major interpretive questions. In this way Edwards may have become familiar with the ideas of Joseph Mede, whom Poole often represented favorably.\(^4\) Edwards sided with Mede on several disputed apocalyptic issues. But the use of such synoptic commentaries as Poole's complicates the identification of sources. On some occasions it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether Edwards derived an idea directly from a commentator or secondhand through another source. Mede's works, as a case in point, were available in the Yale College library, having arrived among the Dummer gift of books; but his principal ideas on the Apocalypse were equally accessible through the volumes of Poole.\(^5\)

Matthew Henry (1662–1714)

Another popular annotator of the Bible whose writings Edwards knew well was Matthew Henry, a prominent spokesman for English Nonconformity.\(^6\) Henry received his education from his father and from a private academy, after which he spent his lifetime as the minister of congregations at Chester and Hackney in London. He was highly successful as a pastor, preacher, and writer.
Matthew Henry's literary efforts went in two directions. On the one hand, he developed various devotional aids for the nurture of private and public piety, including a catechism, a hymnal, a prayer book, and a sacramental handbook. Edwards was well acquainted with this side of his work. For example, while a tutor at Yale College, he made an entry on the letter sheet in his "Catalogue" noting Henry's sacramental meditations, the Communicant's Companion (1704). Edwards was very familiar with the other major literary undertaking of Henry, the Exposition of the Old and New Testaments, a work he cited in the "Apocalypse" as "Henry's Annotations." Like Poole in the Annotations, Henry designed the multivolume commentary on the entire Bible to promote both understanding and piety. It was said that he wrote the Exposition with Poole's Synopsis open in front of him, but the commentary seems more likely the product of his expository preaching because of the homiletical caste to its content and style. When Henry died before finishing the project, his friends were quick to suggest that it be continued by "those that have attended long upon the Ministry of good Mr. Henry" in order that "those precious Fragments" remaining from his reflections on the Bible might be communicated to the world. William Tong (1662–1727), one of Henry's friends and associates, wrote the section in the Exposition on the Revelation. The work was completed in this manner and subsequently went through many editions.

Edwards cited the Exposition twice in the "Apocalypse." Both references are relatively late in the notebook, although he had become familiar with Henry's commentary many years earlier. The first citation,

-- 063 --

written at the end of the "Remarks on Lowman," concerned the time of the millennium described in Revelation 20 (AP; below, p. 123). The other reference in the "Apocalypse" was a late addition to no. 92 which Edwards used to support his optimistic reading of the apocalyptic timetable (below, p. 212). Edwards drew heavily upon Henry's Exposition in the "Scripture" and in the "Blank Bible," suggesting that this popular commentator was more influential upon his ideas and interpretations of the Bible than the infrequent use in the "Apocalypse" implies.

Humphrey Prideaux (1648–1724)

By his own testimony, the "histories of past ages," especially those dealing with "the past advancement of Christ's kingdom" were "sweet" to Edwards, but considerable evidence suggests that for him "secular history was on the whole insignificant, or significant only as it illustrated, illuminated, impinged upon sacred history." The historical volumes Edwards used as sources in the "Apocalypse" and in the Humble Attempt—for example, the works of Humphrey Prideaux—tend to confirm this judgment.

Prideaux was another scholar-divine, a man of accomplishment in both academic and ecclesiastical affairs. He was educated at Christ College, Oxford, where he received the degree of Doctor of Divinity and was appointed as a Hebrew lecturer. When James II selected a Roman Catholic as dean of the college, Prideaux left to become a canon at Norwich and subsequently archdeacon of Suffolk. Following the Glorious Revolution, he swore allegiance to the crown and in 1702 was elevated to the deanship of Norwich. Prideaux's publications include a treatise
defending the validity of Anglican orders against the attacks of the Roman Catholics and a biography, The True Nature of Imposture Fully Display'd in the Life of Mahomet (1697), which served as a vehicle for an attack upon the English deists.

In the "Apocalypse" and the Humble Attempt, Edwards cited Prideaux's The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations, a work of two parts, each in two volumes. The Connection was reprinted frequently, and Edwards used more than one edition at different times. Eventually he owned a copy of the ninth edition which he cited in the notebook and the treatise. In the Connection Prideaux set out to resolve some of the difficulties in scriptural history by exploring the historical period between the decline of ancient Israel and the birth of Christ. He conceived of his work as an "epilogue" to the Old Testament and a "prologue" to the New. Prideaux's narrative of the Jewish people in those years attempted to take into account the history of the entire ancient Near East. He was indebted in his scholarship to James Ussher's Annales Veteris et Novi Testamenti (1650–54), but he had little praise for other earlier chronologists.

Edwards was especially attracted to Prideaux's discussions of the prophecy of Daniel, including his sixty-page excursus on the complex vision of Daniel 9 contained in the fifth book of part one of the Connection. Prideaux believed that the vision told of a period of seventy weeks of years, or 490 years, in which the Jews were to be God's special people and Jerusalem his holy city, beginning with the time of Ezra. That Jewish dispensation ended with the crucifixion, and then Christ's kingdom began. Prideaux was reluctant, however, to probe far into the future on the basis of prophecy, being content to let the events themselves become the only "sure comments." In both the notebook and the treatise, Edwards drew upon Prideaux's dating of the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity of the Jews as an analogue to the 1260 days in Revelation 11:3 and the seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24 (below, pp. 109, 408). Prideaux reconciled the conflicting data on the captivity by concluding that whether the time was reckoned from the beginning of the bondage to the beginning of the restoration or from the end of the captivity until the completion of the restoration, in each case seventy years was involved. Edwards took note of Prideaux's descriptions of the multiple destructions of Babylon and Tyre (below, pp. 176, 409). He used Prideaux's chronological calculations to confirm his own judgment that the downfall of Antichrist's kingdom was not to be accomplished in one moment, but over an extended period of time.

Arthur Bedford (1668–1745)

Bedford was another historian quoted by Edwards in the "Apocalypse." He too was an Oxford graduate and a clergyman of the Church of England whose most prestigious ecclesiastical appointment came late in life with his selection as chaplain for Frederick, Prince of Wales.
Bedford was a logical choice for the post in the court of the heir apparent in view of his earlier published sermon entitled *King George the Security of the Church of England* (1717). His interests ranged widely: he joined the attack upon immorality on the English stage, worked for the reform of church music, and participated in the preparation of an Arabic psalter and a translation of the New Testament. Bedford planned to write on ancient chronology, but hearing that Isaac Newton was engaged in a similar task, he set aside the project. Later he resumed the plan and subsequently published *Animadversions upon Sir Isaac Newton's Book, intitled The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (1728) and a larger volume which Edwards quoted in the "Apocalypse," *The Scripture Chronology Demonstrated by Astronomical Calculations*. The latter, a folio of more than eight hundred pages replete with charts, maps, illustrations, and numerous astronomical and chronological tables, spanned biblical history from the creation to the close of the New Testament canon. The *Scripture Chronology* belongs to the genre of chronological studies Edwards knew well; the "Catalogue" lists more than ten other works of the same kind.

In the *Scripture Chronology* Bedford hoped to vindicate the historical record of the Bible and to reestablish the case for its divine authorship by proving the reliability of the biblical chronology. As part of his argument he defended the Hebrew text of the Old Testament as more trustworthy than the Septuagint and the Samaritan version. He continued the polemic against Newton's work, which, he maintained, "tears up all former Learning by the Roots." The assaults against the Bible demanded in his view a strong counteroffensive. "If any Expression seem severe," he declared, "or written with too great a Warmth, the Reader will consider, that it is only where the Authority of the Sacred Scriptures is vindicated, and the Credibility of its History is asserted." Edwards quoted Bedford in nos. 70 and 71 of the "Apocalypse," copying out a detailed description of the physical arrangements of the camp of Israel in the wilderness and an ingenious resolution of the chronological puzzle posed by Revelation 9:15. In his other notebooks Edwards cited Bedford on a range of issues, a good indication of the broad impact of the work upon Edwards' interpretation of Scripture.

---

Laurence Echard (1670?–1730)

Edwards knew more than one of the historical volumes by Laurence Echard, a clergyman of the Church of England who held minor benefices, but whose main interest was scholarship. Echard was a competent geographer, an able classicist, and a historian of diverse periods. For example, he wrote a history of the early church, a volume Edwards noted twice in the "Catalogue," and a popular three-volume history of England. He translated and edited other volumes, including a condensation of Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*.

In the "Apocalypse" Edwards cited still another work, *The Roman History*, of which the first two volumes were written by Echard and the other three by an anonymous author. The volumes form a chronological continuum broken at five points: Augustus Caesar, Constantine the Great, the fall of Rome, Charlemagne, and the fall of Constantinople. Edwards used the materials from *The Roman History* late in the "Apocalypse" as supplementary data to support the interpretation of the fourth seal and the fifth trumpet summarized in the "Extracts from Low-man." All five
volumes of Echard's work were reissued rapidly in many editions, making nearly hopeless the
task of determining precisely which edition Edwards used. Sets of the work are commonly
composed of mixed editions, as in the case of the volumes in the early Yale library (second,
second, fifth, fourth, and fourth respectively). Edwards used at least two different editions at
times. His initial reference in the "Catalogue" is from his tutorship period (p. 2), but later in 1753
he mentioned the first volume of the work printed in 1734, that is, the eighth edition (pp. 31–32).

Nathaniel Lardner (1684–1768)

Lardner, like Lowman, studied theology at Leyden and Utrecht before becoming a minister of a
dissenting congregation in England, a position he held until he resigned to have more time for his
studies.\footnote{9}

He gained considerable reputation as an apologist and scholar of antiquities by his attempts to
meet the religious challenge of the Enlightenment. He wrote in defense of Christ's miracles and
in support of a literal interpretation of the creation and the fall. His largest effort, The Credibility
of the Gospel History, was a historical apology for the data of Christian revelation, a massive
study in seventeen volumes published over a period of thirty years.\footnote{1} The Gospel History began
as a series of lectures attempting to substantiate the external facts of the New Testament with
passages from ancient authors. Lardner wrote his work to convince the common people of the
validity of Christianity; in fact, the Gospel History was used primarily by scholars and
clergymen. It earned Lardner a Doctor of Divinity degree from Marischal College, Aberdeen, in
1745.

In the "Apocalypse" Edwards referred to the "9th volume" of the Gospel History, the seventh
volume in the second part of the work, a continuation of the catalogue of witnesses supporting
Christian history (below, p. 215). Edwards used Lardner to support his own interpretation that
the slaying of the witnesses had occurred before the Reformation. The references were part of a
late addition to entry no. 92 written sometime after 1748. Edwards was favorably impressed with
the Gospel History, as multiple references to it in the "Catalogue" suggest (pp. 11, 36). He wrote
the following reminder to himself: "Read over Lardner a second time and sum up the evidence."\footnote{2}

John Foxe (1516–87)

As indicated above (p. 4), Foxe exerted a formative influence upon the English apocalyptic
tradition through the Acts and Monuments. At his death he was also writing a commentary on the
book of Revelation, a little known work published posthumously as Eicasmi seu Meditationes, in
Sacram Apocalypsin (1587). Foxe has attracted a great deal of biographical and critical
attention.\footnote{3}

Edwards quoted the Acts and Monuments in the earliest section of the "Apocalypse." Undoubtedly he was familiar with the "Book of Martyrs" even as a youth, for among the Puritans of New England it was a standard piece of religious literature. Edwards turned naturally to
its pages to illustrate his view on the deceits perpetrated by the Antichrist, using the citation to ridicule the doctrine of transubstantiation and to challenge the claims of the Roman Catholic priesthood (below p. 112). The spirit of the "Book of Martyrs" informs the entire "Apocalypse."

It has been impossible to determine the precise edition quoted by Edwards because the Acts and Monuments was widely available in many forms during the eighteenth century. After the first edition of 1563, the work was expanded to more than twenty-three hundred folio pages and issued in three more editions during Foxe's lifetime and another five before the end of the seventeenth century. It was frequently abridged and abstracted. Edwards did not mention the Acts and Monuments in the "Catalogue," but in later years he did note two condensations of it (pp. 15, 17).

Archibald Bower (1686–1766)

In late 1754 or 1755 Edwards made a passing reference in the "Apocalypse" to another polemical work he was reading, The History of the Popes, from the Foundation of the See of Rome, to the Present Time. Portions of the bizarre career of its author, Archibald Bower, are shrouded in uncertainty and controversy. He was a Scot by birth, a Catholic by faith, and a Jesuit by profession, trained in both divinity and classics. Contact with the Inquisition in Italy apparently caused him to flee to England, where he converted to Protestantism. Later he changed his mind and returned to his mother church, only to become disaffected again. After the second renunciation he began to write the History of Popery, as Edwards called it. In time it was revealed as fraudulent, a translation of a work by the French historian Louis Tillemont (1637–98), and Bower was accused of being an agent of the Jesuits.

Edwards' first reference to the History of Popery was entered in the "Catalogue" in 1749 (p. 17). In subsequent years he seemed unaware of or uninterested in the controversy surrounding Bower. Edwards evidently thought highly of the volumes, for he took extensive notes from them on the growth of papal power in a separate manuscript entitled "Episodes in [the] History of the Church." The reference to the History of Popery in the "Apocalypse" is part of the only footnote in the notebook (below, p. 295, n. 8). The precise intention of Edwards' footnote remains unclear because it points to a set of supplementary sheets paginated consecutively with the second volume of Bower's work but not bound with it, having been sent separately to the subscribers. No extant copy of these pages has been located.

John Willison (1680–1750)

Another author whom Edwards cited was his Scottish friend and correspondent John Willison, a Presbyterian minister in Dundee. A graduate of the University of Glasgow, Willison was a prominent clergyman in the Church of Scotland. Described as a "keen controversialist," he displayed that disposition in his public opposition to the Church of England and in his attacks
upon the Church of Rome. He made his strong dislike for the Roman Catholic Church very
evident in his published sermons, Popery Another Gospel (1745) and A Prophecy of the French
Revolution and Downfall of Antichrist (1793), the latter a posthumous publication. Edwards,
after reading the sermon against popery, sent it in 1747 to his father Timothy.8

Willison played a major role in the development of the revivals in Scotland during the 1740s. A
senior member of the evangelical circle, he was one of the first outside the Church of England to
invite George Whitefield into his pulpit.9 He was deeply committed to the cause of the revivals
and wrote in support of the movement. For example, he introduced the Scottish edition of
Edwards' The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God, which appeared in 1742,1
and later wrote the preface for an edition of Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God (1745).
During the same period he began to correspond with Edwards, sharing

-- 070 --

with him many interests. In 1749 he wrote, "I should be glad to do any thing in my power, for
promoting the Concert for United Prayer, and Oh that it were spread both far and near; it would
be a token of a general Revival of religion to be fast approaching."2

In the Humble Attempt Edwards quoted from A Fair and Impartial Testimony, Essayed in Name
of a Number of Ministers, Elders, and Christian People of the Church of Scotland, unto the
laudable Principles, Wrestlings and Attainments of that Church; and against the Backslidings,
Corruptions, Divisions, and prevailing Evils, both of former and present times, an occasional
tract in which Willison used a historical format to urge reformation upon the Church of
Scotland.3 From his perspective, true religion was in danger in the mid-1740s. His survey of the
development of Christianity in Scotland from the third century until his own day was in effect a
description of the religious decline of the national church, which, he warned, was "gradually
drawing nearer to the Superstitions and Idolatry of Rome." He raised the specter of "an
Inundation of Popery, that Antichristian, Tyrannical, Bloody, Blasphemous, Idolatrous and
Damnable Religion" sweeping the land.4 By God's mercy alone the nation had been spared a
judgment. As a step toward reformation, Willison called for more national fasts and the setting of
"Times of meeting for spiritual Conference, Fasting, Prayer and Wrestling for the Down-pouring
of the Spirit upon the whole Church and Land."5 Edwards used an isolated account of the
religious successes in Salzburg, Austria, from Willison's volume as further evidence of the
mercies of God upon the contemporary church (below, p. 363).

John Erskine (1720–803)

In the "Apocalypse" Edwards quoted a sermon by another of his Scottish correspondents, John
Erskine.6 A son of Edinburgh by birth and education, Erskine after his university training served
Presbyterian congregations at Kirkintilloch, Culross, and Edinburgh during a long and successful
ministry. In the 1740s he had a full career ahead of him. His activities during that decade thrust
him into the forefront of Scottish

-- 071 --
evangelicalism. He became a prolific author and a regular correspondent of evangelicals on the European continent and in America, including Edwards after 1747.

In 1742 Erskine's publication of *The Signs of the Times Consider'd: or, the high Probability, that the Present Appearances in New-England, and the West of Scotland, are a Prelude of the Glorious Things promised to the Church in the latter Ages* announced his commitment to revivalism and his interest in apocalyptic speculation—concerns which Edwards shared. Erskine believed that the dispensations of his time were "a Prelude of greater Things yet to come." He hoped that the contemporary successes would encourage Christians to work and pray for further progress in the kingdom. The study of prophecies was also profitable and should be encouraged. Some of Erskine's later publications signaled interests held in common with Edwards as, for example, *Considerations on the Spirit of Popery* (1778) and *Sketches and Hints on Church History, and Theological Controversy, chiefly translated and abridged from modern foreign writers* (1790, 1797).

Erskine and Edwards frequently exchanged publications and judgments about their readings. It is likely that Erskine sent the copy of his sermon, *The Influence of Religion on National Happiness. A Sermon Preached before the Society for propagating Christian Knowledge, at their anniversary meeting, in the High Church of Edinburgh, on Monday, January 5, 1756*, which Edwards cited among the "Hopeful Events" in the "Apocalypse" (below, p. 297). Erskine preached the sermon to point out the positive impact of religion upon the culture and to raise funds for the activities of the society. Edwards cited the activities of the Christians in London and Edinburgh as further evidence of the favorable state of religion in the late 1750s.

In the years after Edwards' death, Erskine continued his interest in the concerns of his late American friend. In conjunction with Jonathan Edwards, Jr., he was responsible for the posthumous publication of several volumes by Edwards, including the series of sermons preached in 1739 (above, p. 22). He continued to support the idea of a concert of prayer and in 1784 sent a copy of the *Humble Attempt* to Baptist ministers

---

Photograph of manuscript page 7 in the "Notes on the Apocalypse"

---

Photograph of manuscript page 185 in the "Notes on the Apocalypse"

---

in the area of Northampton, England, an act which led to the revival of the concert and the republication of the *Humble Attempt* (below, p. 87).